

## **Tied Together With A Smile by Luna0603**

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**Summary:** El thought this was what she wanted. When regret and desperation sink in, she must put on a fake smile and rebuild her life as it crumbles around her. (Warning- some smut in chapter 8).

## 1. Chapter 1

A/N: Welcome! I want to start by thanking everyone who read my previous story and left your reviews on it. A lot of you are asking for a continuation from that, and I am considering the idea of following up with a compilation of one-shots showcasing various significant events taking place over the future, OR maybe even a full-blown sequel. We'll see. However, THIS fic is completely unrelated to that one; this is its own story to tell. It is rated M for language, some brief sexual content, and sensitive subject matter in a future chapter. I hope you enjoy the first chapter!

**Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or any of its original characters.**

**0-0-0**

Mike rolled off of El onto his back and looked up at the ceiling, breathing heavily as he came down from the high he had been on all morning. Next to him, El pulled the covers up to chest level and turned onto her side, propping herself up on one elbow to face him.

"That was amazing," she sighed, her messy hair falling over her shoulder and hanging in front of her chest.

"Which time?" Mike laughed, turning his head to catch his girlfriend's gaze. El laughed and swatted his arm before rolling forward and snuggling into his side, her head resting on his chest.

"I have to get up and get ready," she grumbled.

"It's not too late to call Max and cancel," Mike suggested with a grin.

"You know I can't do that," El said.

"Sure you can. Just say 'Max, as much as I would love to drive all the way to Terre Haute and surround myself with people I don't know on a college campus that I've never been to, I would much rather stay at home this weekend and keep having sex with my boyfriend.' Friends

don't lie, after all," Mike replied, running his fingers through El's hair. El sighed and shook her head, looking up to face him.

"We both know how well that would go over," she said. "Besides, we won't be surrounded by tons of people. We're just going to visit Robin, and we'll be back tomorrow afternoon."

"I know, I know," Mike relented. "But I'm allowed to be a little selfish." El smiled and leaned forward to place a kiss on Mike's lips.

"Why don't you do something with Lucas this weekend?" she suggested when she pulled back.

"That's probably what I'll end up doing," Mike sighed. "Just promise me you won't go to any frat parties and fall in love with some college guy."

"Aww, babe," El teased, caressing her hand down the side of Mike's face. "Is that what you're worried about? Well you know I can't make any promises." Mike rolled his eyes and shook his head, pushing El off of him and standing from his bed.

"So this is what giving a girl five years of my life gets me," he said jokingly, pulling on his boxers.

"Come on, you know I'm only joking," El smiled, sitting up on her knees on the edge of the bed and holding the covers around her torso. Mike stood in front of her and tucked her hair behind both of her ears, letting his hands rest on her bare shoulders.

"I know," he said softly. He leaned down to kiss El again, and his lips lingered on hers for a moment before pulling back. "Max will be here in twenty minutes. If you don't want to miss her, you better start getting ready." El nodded and stood from the bed to gather her clothes so she could get dressed before brushing her hair and touching up the little bit of makeup she was wearing. She double-checked the overnight duffle bag she had brought, and when she was ready, El and Mike walked downstairs to wait for Max in the living room.

Twenty minutes later, Max's car pulled into the driveway, and the

redhead hopped out of the driver's seat and hurried to the front door to let herself in. She walked into the living room, following the call of El's voice letting her know where she and Mike were.

"You ready to go?" Max asked El excitedly. El looked over at Mike and shot him an apologetic look before kissing him on the cheek.

"Yep, I'm ready!" she replied, standing from the couch and grabbing her duffle bag. Mike walked to the front door with El, taking her hand and turning her toward himself when they reached the doorway. He placed his hands on her waist and leaned in to kiss her. Max rolled her eyes as El wrapped her arms around Mike's neck to pull him closer into the kiss. When El pulled back, she saw Max out of the corner of her eyes with her hands on her hips, tapping her foot impatiently.

"You guys act like you won't be seeing each other again literally tomorrow," Max said annoyed.

"Be safe, and call me when you get home tomorrow," Mike said to El, ignoring Max's annoyance.

"I will, sweetie," El nodded. "I love you."

"I love you too," Mike said as El picked up her bag she had set on the floor and she and Max walked out the door toward Max's car.

"I swear, I have never seen a couple as nauseatingly touchy-feely as you two," Max said as she drove away from the cul-de-sac and turned en route to the highway.

"Oh, come on, we're not that bad," El argued.

"Not that bad? El, you've known for days what time I was picking you up today. The makeout session couldn't have happened before I got there?" Max pointed out.

"It wasn't a makeout session; it was a goodbye kiss," El defended herself. "Besides, I thought we were past this whole you-hating-on-Mike thing."

"I am not hating on Mike," Max sighed. "It's just that I know how

serious you two have gotten, and if you're not careful, I think you could run in to the same issue we had a few years ago when all you two wanted to do was be with each other and no one else. I don't want you to start blowing off me and the rest of your friends just to spend every second with your boyfriend again."

"It's not like that," El assured her. "I know it seemed like that at first when I first moved back to Hawkins last year, but it was only because for the first time after two years, we weren't going to have to plan to see each other only on holidays and school breaks."

"I guess you're right," Max said slowly, nodding her understanding. "You really did get a lot better once school started last year. Surprisingly, you spent more time at my locker than at Mike's."

"See?" El smiled, trying to prove her point.

"Then again, you and I also don't take the classes that the boys do," Max pointed out.

"Regardless, you're my best friend, and I care about spending quality time with you," El said.

"You better," Max laughed. "So are you excited for your first visit to a college campus?"

"I don't know," El shrugged. "Seeing Robin will be fun, but what are we going to do?"

"Whatever we want. Robin said her mini fridge is stocked with drinks, and she said something about a couple parties going on tonight," Max replied. "No parents, no teachers. For the next twenty-four hours, you're going to feel more free than you ever have." El nodded in response. She thought about Mike's request for her not to go to any parties, but she decided to keep that to herself to avoid hearing Max talk about how controlling Mike was being. El knew that there was an important difference between being controlling and being protective, and for whatever reason, Max refused to acknowledge that whenever it came to Mike.

For the next hour and a half, the two girls enjoyed sharing gossip

they had heard at school, talking about their plans for their senior year they had just started, and listening to music. Finally, they started seeing signs for Indiana State University, and soon Max was pulling into a gas station near campus. Robin had instructed Max to meet her there so she could lead the two girls to the visitor parking lot reserved for visitors of students living in the dorms. After a moment, Max saw Robin waving from the open window of the driver's seat of her car. Max drove toward her until she was close enough to hear Robin call out for her to follow her to the parking lot. As they drove through campus, El watched out the window as they passed groups of students walking by, studying in the grass, sunbathing in the grass, playing cornhole, and just enjoying their Saturday afternoon. Max came to a stop in a parking spot in a lot marked by a visitor sign, and the two of them got out of the car to greet Robin.

"Max! How are you?!" Robin exclaimed, quickly wrapping Max into a tight hug.

"I've been good! How are you? How are classes going?" Max asked, pulling back from the hug.

"So far, so good," Robin replied. "Hi El!" She turned to give El a hug as well before the three of them piled into Robin's car and drove toward the dorm that she lived in.

"What do you guys want to do first? Do you want a tour? Are you hungry?" Robin asked after they exited the car. "It's too beautiful outside to hang out in the dorm." Max and El agreed as the late August breeze blew through their hair.

"I don't know about you two, but I'm starving," Max said. El and Robin agreed that they were hungry as well, so Robin started to lead them toward her favorite on-campus dining option. As they walked through campus, Robin pointed out several different buildings where she attended classes. El watched with wide eyes as Robin pointed these out, wondering how she would ever expect herself to survive in such an environment. El had had hard enough of a time adjusting to high school the previous year when Joyce had moved the family back to Hawkins and El had started her junior year with Will, Mike, and the rest of their friends. After an entire year within the walls of the

high school, El felt confident enough for their senior year, but looking around herself now, she saw major concerns raising about college.

"Hello? Earth to El," Max's hand waved in front of El's face to bring her back to the present.

"Sorry," she blushed.

"I said we're here. If you want a burger or chicken tenders, go through that door over there. If you want Chinese food, come with me this way," Robin said. All three girls walked in the direction of Chinese food, and a short time later, they were sitting outside, El's first experience with college food staring up at her from the tray sitting on the table.

"Are you two down to check out a party or two tonight?" Robin asked, using her chopsticks to maneuver the noodles on her plate.

"Absolutely!" Max exclaimed. Robin and Max looked across the table at El and noticed her look of apprehension.

"I've never been to something like that," El shrugged.

"Max and I will be there the whole time, and if you feel uncomfortable at all, we can leave. But I promise, you'll be fine," Robin assured her with a smile. Reluctantly, El nodded, agreeing to accompany them to the party.

After they finished eating, Robin showed them around campus a bit more. She pointed out the library, the basketball arena, and they walked around one of the stores in the student union which was full of university apparel and other merchandise. When Robin had nothing more to show them, the girls headed back toward her dorm, Robin excited to introduce Max and El to her roommate. When they walked into the dorm room, El was shocked at how small it was. It was barely larger than a walk-in closet. There were two desks, one on each wall on either side of the room, and two beds, one at a normal height and the other lofted above a couch. A girl with blonde hair and freckles hopped up from the couch wearing a huge smile when the three of them entered the room.

"Max, El, this is my roommate Abby," Robin introduced. Abby greeted Max and El happily, embracing each of them in a warm hug.

"It's nice to meet you! Robin has told me a lot about you," she said through her smile. "How was your look around campus?"

"It was great! There is so much to see and do here. It's way better than Hawkins," Max replied with a laugh.

"Well Robin tells me you two are seniors. Maybe we'll see you around here next year!" Abby exclaimed.

"Stop trying to recruit them. They're here to hang out and get away for a night, not to join your sorority," Robin said with a smirk. Abby cocked her head to the side and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Excuse me for being welcoming," she said sarcastically. "Do you two girls want a drink?" Abby walked toward their mini fridge which was situated on the other side of the couch under the lofted bed. El glanced over at Max, unsure of how to respond, but Max quickly responded with her own "Yes please!"

"This is just to loosen you up a bit for the party tonight," Abby said, handing Max and El each a cup of vodka and pink lemonade. While Abby returned to the mini fridge to make a drink for each Robin and herself, Robin offered Max and El seats on the couch while she situated herself on the bed, leaning back against the wall.

"So El, how are things with Mike?" Robin asked, accepting the drink Abby handed her as Abby climbed onto the bed and sat next to Robin.

"Things with Mike are great," El replied with a smile. She took a small sip of the beverage in her hand and, to her delight, she really only tasted the pink lemonade.

"You've been together how many years now?" Robin questioned.

"It'll be five years in a couple months," El said, to which Abby nearly choked on her drink.

"Five years?!" Abby repeated. "What, did you meet when you were

babies?"

"We were twelve," El clarified.

"And he's the only guy you've ever been with?" Abby asked incredulously. El glanced over at Max in confusion, but she was not met with any help from her friend. In fact, El thought she saw almost as much judgement in Max's eyes as she did in Abby's.

"Yes, he's the only guy I've ever been with," El replied, and Abby shook her head. "What's the big deal?"

"No offense, El. I know that we hardly know each other. But when were you planning on getting out there? Playing the field?" Abby asked. El looked over at Max again for assistance with Abby's phrases.

"She means when are you going to try dating someone other than Mike," Max explained.

"Not even date, necessarily. Just experiment with, at the very least," Abby clarified. El furrowed her brow, taken aback by the insinuation that she needed to be with someone else.

"Why would I want to do that?" El asked.

"Don't you ever wonder what it might be like to go out with another guy?" Abby asked.

"No, of course not. I love Mike," El replied.

"I never said you didn't. I loved Thomas, too," Abby said. "Thomas was my high school boyfriend. We dated for three years before we moved to different cities for college. We thought we would try out the long-distance thing, but a few weeks in, I began to realize that I owed it to myself to really put myself out there. I was tying myself down to a guy that I met before I could even drive a car. Did I really want him to be the only guy I would ever so much as go on a date with?" El pursed her lips and took another sip of her drink. She had not been expecting to have to defend her relationship this evening.

"Well I don't feel that way," El replied dryly. "Mike doesn't have me

tied down. I am with him because I want to be with him."

"He really is a good kid, and they are great together," Robin offered El some assistance, and El could see a look of apology in Robin's eyes for bringing Mike up.

"I'm sure he is. I don't mean to talk badly about him or anything. Obviously, I've never even met him," Abby said quickly. "I'm just speaking from experience when I suggest that, El, you should consider your options so you don't wake up one day twenty years from now and realize the rest of your life was decided for you when you were twelve years old."

"How much vodka did you put in your drink?" Robin joked before turning to El, an apology still in her eyes. "She must be drunk already." Luckily, they changed the subject and started talking about some guys that were going to be at the party tonight. El was barely listening; she was thinking about what Abby had said. How dare Abby act like she knew anything and El and Mike's relationship. It was not Abby's place to give that type of advice. Still, did she have a point? El knew it was unusual for people their age to have already been in a five-year relationship, but she just thought it proved they were soulmates. She gulped down the rest of her drink and pushed Abby's negativity out of her mind. Of course she and Mike were soulmates. Abby didn't know what she was talking about.

Later that night, Robin and Abby started going through their closets to find outfits to wear to the party. When Abby looked in Max and El's bags and saw the clothes they had packed, she turned up her nose and offered to find them something in her closet. She laid out a black scoop-neck dress for El and a red top and black skirt for Max. El changed into the dress which ended mid-thigh and was more form-fitting than she was used to. Abby then sat El down and teased her hair a bit to give it more volume, and she added a bit more makeup, as El generally wore a natural look. When they were ready to go, El looked in the mirror and widened her eyes in shock at how much older she looked simply from wearing her hair and makeup differently.

"You two look fantastic!" Abby squealed, proud of herself for her part in their makeovers. The four girls exited the dorm and began the

walk toward the other side of campus. El noticed it seemed like the amount of people walking through campus now had doubled since the afternoon, and they were all dressed up like they were going to parties as well. Was this what Saturday nights were always like?

"Tonight may be a little extra rowdy," Robin said, almost as if she had read El's mind. "It is everyone's first weekend back here."

After a while, they approached a large white house. People filled the spacious porch and the balcony above the porch, and the sound of the music inside seemed to actually rattle the building. El looked up at the Greek letters adorned in the center of the house above the balcony, and she knew this was exactly the type of party that Mike had asked her not to go to. She took a deep breath and followed Abby and Max inside the house, Robin right behind her. When they opened the front door, the sound of the music seemed to double in volume, and there were people packed in shoulder-to-shoulder. The girls made their way through the foyer to find some space in the living room.

"Let's get some drinks," Abby hollered and pointed in the direction that El assumed was the kitchen. They walked past groups of people, some dancing, some talking, some making out in ways El never thought people actually did in public. When they reached the kitchen, there were a couple different large punch bowls with plastic cups set up on the counter. Abby started grabbing cups and scooping the red liquid into them, and El accepted the one she was handed. She took a sip and scrunched her face up at how bitter it tasted.

"What's in this?" she asked, pointing at her cup. Abby shrugged as she took a giant swig of her own. The girls headed back toward the living room, bumping in to people along the way. Max and El sat next to each other on the arm of the couch while Robin and Abby stood facing them, drinking their beverages. When the song changed, Abby squealed in excitement and started moving her hips to the beat of the new song. El watched in shock when a man walked up behind Abby, placed his hands on her hips, and started moving right along with her. Did Abby know this man? El didn't think so. Yet Abby seemed to enjoy dancing with him.

"Let's go get another," Max said into El's ear, pointing at her empty

cup. El looked down at her own cup which was still half full and then back up at Max. "Just chug it!" El looked at the red liquid again and hesitantly brought it to her mouth before downing the contents in three large gulps.

"Woooo! That's what I'm talking about!" Abby yelled, pointing at El in excitement after El had finished her drink. El and Max stood and disappeared again to the kitchen to refill their cups. When they returned to the couch, Abby's mouth was attacking the mouth of the guy who had come to dance with her, and Robin seemed to be engulfed in conversation with a petite dark-haired girl along the wall. Max and El reclaimed their seats on the arm of the couch, and El started sipping her drink. It didn't taste quite as bitter to her, and she wasn't sure why, but it seemed to be going down a lot more smoothly than her first cup had. El felt herself start to sway back and forth to the music that was filling her head, and she felt her feelings of discomfort and apprehension about attending the party leave her mind and become replaced with happiness as if she didn't have a care in the world.

"Hey!" A male voice greeted them. El looked up to see two guys standing before herself and Max. One had thick blonde hair and striking blue eyes and stood an entire foot taller than her. The other had chestnut hair, green eyes, and tan skin. "Wanna dance?" El started to shake her head. She smiled politely, about to decline by saying they both had boyfriends, but Max suddenly grabbed ahold of El's hand and pulled her to her feet.

"Yeah! Let's go!" Max exclaimed, leading El a few steps away. Max kept ahold of El's hand as she started moving her body to the rhythm of the music that filled the house. Since Max was with her, El felt comfortable swaying and began to mirror Max's movements to the music. As the song changed, Max tilted her head back and gulped down the rest of her drink, and the blonde guy disappeared down the hallway without saying a word. He returned a moment later carrying two more plastic cups filled with the red liquid. He handed one to Max and gestured toward El's cup, suggesting she had to finish hers before she could have more. El took the final drink and then traded her empty cup for the full one that the guy offered her.

Max and El kept dancing to the music and taking sips of their drinks.

El watched as the guy with the darker hair pressed himself up behind Max, placing his hands on her hips, and he and Max seemed to move in sync to the music. El smiled when she felt someone press up behind her as well. She moved her hand down and laced her fingers between the fingers of the hand that was on her hip, and she continued to move her hips to the music, sipping her drink. As she finished her cup once again, she felt the parted lips of the person behind her touch her neck and begin lightly sucking, followed by a tongue gently gliding over the skin. El tilted her head back, a small moan escaping her lips, and out of the corner of her eye she saw the blonde hair. El's drooping eyes shot wide open when the realization hit her that this wasn't Mike. She threw the hand that she was holding off of her and took a step forward quickly, turning around to face the guys she had been dancing with.

"What the hell?" he said angrily.

"I... I... need to use the bathroom," El mumbled, not caring if he or Max heard her excuse. El began to stumble down the hallway until she reached the open bathroom door. She turned inside the room and closed and locked the door, leaning her back against it and sliding down until she was sitting on the floor. El was breathing heavily and her eyes filled with tears as the guilt started to set in. She reached out and ripped off some toilet paper to dry her face with and placed a hand over her chest while she heaved through her tears. When she was calming down, El began to shakily stand up and walked toward the bathroom sink. She looked at herself in the mirror over the sink and noticed that she couldn't stand still. Even grasping the edge of the sink, El was swaying back and forth. She stared into the reflection of her glazed eyes while she wiped the tears and eyeliner that had begun to streak.

"You're okay. Pull yourself together," she whispered to herself. She hadn't really done anything wrong, after all. She was just dancing with her friend Max. Sure, she was caught up in the moment at first and let another man dance with her, but when reality kicked in and she noticed it wasn't Mike, El had immediately pushed him away and left the situation. There was nothing she could have done differently. El took a deep breath and threw the toilet paper into the trash can. When she opened the bathroom door, Max and Robin were waiting

outside and quickly pushed their way into the bathroom with El, closing the door behind them.

"Are you okay?" Robin asked.

"Yeah, yeah I'm fine," El nodded. "I just... got a little freaked out I guess."

"This is your first time being drunk, isn't it?" Robin realized. El nodded again. "Okay, let's grab Abby and head back to the dorm."

"No, you don't have to do that because of me," El protested.

"It's okay, El. Robin and I are ready to go anyway," Max insisted. El knew that Max was having a good time, but she wasn't going to argue. El nodded her agreement, and the three of them left the bathroom to find Abby.

A few minutes later, the four girls were walking back to the other side of campus where Robin and Abby's dorm was. They hadn't been counting how many cups Abby had drank, but she was stumbling worse than the other three. Robin had one of Abby's arms around her neck to stabilize her as they walked down the sidewalk. El knew they were taking the same path that they had taken several hours prior, but it seemed like the walk had doubled in length. When they finally reached Abby and Robin's dorm, Abby flopped onto her bed, passing out almost immediately. Robin pulled out the couch into a full-size bed and offered Max and El some pillows and blankets. They prepared for bed, and moments after Robin turned the lights out, El heard Robin's soft snoring from the lofted bed above, and she heard Max's slow and steady breathing from beside her on the pullout couch. El stared straight up at the dark ceiling, her head still spinning from the liquor, and laid there for hours before falling asleep.

The next day, the girls awoke and got breakfast from the dining hall downstairs in the dorm. After showering and getting their bags packed again, Max and El hugged Abby goodbye, and Robin led them down to her car to give them a ride to the visitor parking lot where they had parked the previous day. Max and El thanked Robin for letting them stay the night and showing them a good time. Soon, the two of them were on the road back to Hawkins, riding in silence as El

watched the scenery pass out the window.

"That was so much fun. We should come stay again sometime," Max said, breaking the silence. She waited to see if El would respond, and she did not. "El, is something wrong?"

"You agree with Abby, don't you?" El asked, turning to face Max. "About Mike and I."

"What do you mean?" Max asked, furrowing her brow.

"She was saying all that stuff about how I need to be with other guys, and the only person who tried to defend me was Robin," El said. Max felt guilty when she saw a trace of hurt in El's eyes.

"I just think she had some valid points," Max sighed. "You're only seventeen, and you're already in a relationship that has lasted longer than some marriages. Mike is the only guy you've ever dated, the only guy you've ever kissed, the only guy you've ever had sex with."

"So?" El said defensively.

"So, I can't imagine if Lucas and I had only ever been with each other," Max continued.

"Are you saying Mike and I should break up every few months like you and Lucas do?" El asked in disbelief.

"I know you don't understand the structure of mine and Lucas's relationship," Max said. "I really do care about him. Hell, I would even say I love him. But I love him as a person because he is such a great guy. And sure, we may end up together forever someday, but right now, we have a mutual understanding that our relationship remains casual. We both wanted to be able to see what's out there so that we know we are making the right choice to be together if we end up together."

"I just don't understand how you could want that if you love someone," El said in confusion.

"When I say I love Lucas, I mean just that. I love him. He's a great guy, I want to be around him, I care about him and what's going on

in his life. I don't mean that I am in love with him and dream about getting married and having his children. We're only seventeen," Max explained.

"So... you think I should break up with Mike so I can see other people?" El asked.

"I only think you should do that if you think it would be beneficial for you," Max replied. "I told you to break up with Mike once, and you listened, and that lasted all of two days. But we are older now, and you need to be able to make your own decisions about what you want out of your relationship. I just want you to understand that you do have options." El nodded.

"I understand," she said, turning to look out the window again. After a few minutes, another question crossed El's mind. "Do you think Mike thinks about this too? Do you think he wonders what it would be like with other girls?"

"I don't know, maybe," Max shrugged. "He's honestly never said anything about it to me or to Lucas as far as I know. But maybe you should bring it up, talk about it. Just see where his mind is with everything." El leaned back against the headrest of the passenger seat and molded over Max's advice. The two barely spoke the rest of the ride home.

"Thanks for driving," El said when Max pulled up to her house. El reached over and gave Max a hug before grabbing her bag and stepping out of the car. As Max drove away, El walked inside and was greeted by Joyce and Will sitting on the couch watching television.

"El! Welcome home," Joyce stood to hug her daughter. "Did you have a good time?"

"Yeah, we had a lot of fun," El replied with a smile.

"Just think, you'll be applying to colleges yourself this year," Joyce said, which made El briefly think about being in that environment with so many people all the time.

"Well now I know a bit more of what to expect," El replied. "I'm going

to go call Mike and let him know I'm home. Do you care if he comes over?"

"Of course not," Joyce waved her hand. El went into the kitchen and dialed Mike's phone number.

"Hello?" said a female voice after the third ring.

"Hi Mrs. Wheeler. Is Mike home?" El asked.

"He is. Just a second, dear," Karen said on the other end. El heard Karen's muffled voice call for Mike, and a moment later he answered the phone.

"Hey baby, how was your trip?" Mike asked when he got on the phone.

"I can tell you all about it when you get here. Wanna come over?" El asked.

"Sure. I'll see you in a little bit. I love you," Mike said.

"I love you too," El replied before hanging up the phone. She was confused by the subtle lingering feeling of guilt in her stomach, but she ignored it while she waited for Mike to arrive. When he got there, after briefly chatting with Joyce and Will, Mike followed El down the hallway into her bedroom. She sat on her bed and patted the spot next to her, waiting for Mike to join her, which he did. Mike lifted his hand to the side of El's face and guided her lips to his.

"I missed you," he said softly when the kiss had ended.

"I missed you too," El smiled.

"So, how was it? How's Robin doing? What did you guys do?" Mike asked. El didn't answer right away; she looked into the brown eyes that were looking back at her and felt foolish for even letting the idea cross her mind that she could ever consider being with anyone else.

"We can talk about that later," El said before biting her bottom lip and shifting her body over Mike's so she was straddling him on the bed, pinning him between herself and the wall. She leaned forward to

kiss him, his lips parting to accept her tongue into his mouth while his hands roamed over her body. Abby and Max were wrong, El told herself. This is all she ever wanted, and nothing would be able to change that.

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**A/N: Thank you for reading the first chapter. Let me know what you're thinking so far, and I will update as soon as I can!**

## 2. Chapter 2

A/N: Thank you all so much for your positive reaction to this story. I was not expecting so much feedback after only the first chapter! But I am so appreciative. I hope you all enjoy this chapter just as much!

Stranger Records: Yes, I agree. I can see Max and Abby's points as well, but like you pointed out, everyone is different. I also agree that there is a lot of area to explore, and I hope you enjoy the route this goes!

HarTreeGrove: I know, I hate when Mike is sad. We will have to see what happens!

Grievesforyou: Meddling is in Max's nature haha.

Exploding Helmets: I am strongly considering writing a sequel to my previous story, but I like to focus all my attention on one story at a time. So it may very well be down the road after this one! I do hope you enjoy this story just as much though : )

HarleyGrove: Right, it's honestly a pretty believable scenario for El to find herself in, especially since she and Mike got together so young. I'm glad you are looking forward to seeing what areas are explored here.

Phieillydinya: Thank you so much, I am glad you like it so far!

Niko: I am a huge Mileven supporter as well, but I felt like there was a lot of potential to explore here. I do hope you continue to read and enjoy it!

JayneFawn: Very true; I agree with your assessment of both Mike and El's mindset here. There is definitely a lot to explore here and a lot that I have planned for this story. I hope you enjoy it!

Angryfanfic: Thank you!

: Yeah, Max has her redeemable qualities, but she certainly gets

**in the way of Mileven.**

**39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star: Thank you! I am so glad you like it so far.**

**Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or any of its original characters.**

**0-0-0**

Nearly two weeks had passed since El and Max had visited Robin. Originally, El thought that Max and Abby had been completely wrong. She knew she was happy with Mike. She loved him; he loved her. So what if neither of them had any other relationship experience? El didn't think they needed to have loved other people to know that their love is real. Still, as the days passed, El found her eyes wandering toward other guys that she saw in the hallways at school. She felt guilty for looking at other guys and for wondering what it might be like to go on a "first date" with one of them or experience another "first kiss." While her eyes wandered, El never acted on it. She knew that what she had with Mike was special, and she knew she could never act on any of these impulses and risk what she had with him. Still, El thought it may be worth trying to talk to Mike about what she was feeling. She could not forget the possibility that Mike may have had similar thoughts. Surely, if he had thought about what it would be like to see other girls, then he wouldn't be too upset about her thinking about what it would be like to see other guys. El knew that she would have to talk to him. More than anything, she felt guilty about hiding so much from him, from the college party, to Max and Abby's advice, to what she was thinking now. She had always been able to talk to Mike about anything. He deserved to know what was on her mind.

Mike was in his advanced placement chemistry class, staring at the clock on the wall while his teacher wrapped up the lesson for the day. Will and his lab partner were seated two rows behind Mike and his own lab partner. Mike and Will had been disappointed that Mr. Anderson had insisted on assigned seating, but both of the boys ended up getting along well with their assigned lab partners.

"I want everyone's lab reports turned in at the start of class on

Friday," Mr. Anderson, Hawkins High School's advanced placement chemistry teacher, said, addressing the class thirty seconds before the bell was to ring, signaling the end of class.

"Wanna meet after school at the library tomorrow to finish it?" Lindsey suggested, glancing over at Mike while they both loaded their chemistry books back into their backpacks.

"Yeah, that's fine with me," Mike answered his lab partner. As the bell rang, the two of them stood and walked from the classroom and down the hallway.

"Great," Lindsey smiled. "And don't hate me, but I don't know how much help my notes will be. I have no idea how I tested out of regular chem. I swear I feel like an idiot in this class."

"Well you shouldn't, and I don't hate you," Mike said as the two of them came to a halt where Mike would continue walking forward to his locker and Lindsey would head down the adjoining hallway to hers. "Lucky for you, I do understand the class, and I'll explain my notes to you."

"Mike, you're literally my saving grace this year. I would absolutely be failing if it weren't for you," Lindsey said, twisting the end of a strand of her long auburn hair.

"I don't think that's true," Mike chuckled, glancing over at Will who was waiting for him. "But hey, I've got to get going. I'll see you in class tomorrow." They bid each other goodbye and each turned their own way to walk toward their respective lockers.

"Better hope El doesn't see Lindsey flirting with you like that," Will smirked as he and Mike walked toward Mike's locker.

"What are you talking about? Lindsey wasn't flirting with me. Besides, she knows about El. I talk about her all the time," Mike said, opening his locker to gather what he needed to take home for the night.

"She might know about El, but that doesn't mean she cares. Just be careful. Need I remind you about the time El knocked Max off her

skateboard with her mind because she saw the two of you talking and smiling?" Will said.

"Well, then it sounds like Lindsey's the one who needs to be careful, doesn't it?" Mike laughed, shutting his locker to reveal El standing on the other side. She had just arrived from her last class of the day.

"Who is Lindsey? And why does she need to be careful?" El asked.

"Lindsey's my lab partner, and it was nothing, just Will being Will," Mike brushed off the comment about Lindsey needing to be careful. He leaned down to peck El on the lips and took her hand in his as the three of them walked out of the school for the day.

On the car ride home, El was considering talking with Mike tonight. She still wasn't sure about whether or not she should actually break up with him, and she figured she wouldn't know for sure until she was in the moment, but she knew he deserved to know what was on her mind. El thought of Lindsey's name again and wished she had been able to see Mike interact with her. If El could see any clues pointing to the idea that Mike may actually be interested in seeing other girls, she would be a lot less conflicted about the conversation she knew was coming.

"Will, you'll need to drive yourself and El to school tomorrow," Mike said suddenly, remembering his conversation with Lindsey. "I have to meet Lindsey at the library to finish our chem lab after school, so I don't know how long I'll be."

"You're meeting up with Lindsey tomorrow?" El asked, turning to face Mike as he drove.

"Yeah, we have this assignment due on Friday. You're okay if I go to the library with her, right?" Mike asked.

"Of course," El replied. Mike reached over and squeezed her hand as El turned to look out the window the rest of the drive home.

When they arrived at the Byers' house, no one was home, as Joyce's shift did not end until 8PM. Will went down the hallway to his room to work on his homework, while Mike and El retreated to El's room.

A little while later, El and Mike were sitting on her bed doing homework; Mike was helping El with her Algebra II assignment. Her mind was not on algebra, not that it usually was when she was trying to do her homework. Although today, she wasn't struggling to focus because of her preference of geometry over algebra. Her thoughts of the conversation that she knew was coming with Mike had only intensified since the car ride. She knew she had been able to suppress her feelings of guilt periodically over the past nearly two weeks, but she also knew those feelings always found their way back. El knew that she would not move past the guilt for good until she was completely honest with Mike about what she had been thinking. She had to tell him everything, and she knew that started with the party.

"Mike, there's something I have to tell you," she blurted out. Mike stopped mid-sentence, not that El had heard what he was saying anyway, and laid his pencil down on the notebook El was holding in her lap. She closed the notebook and set it next to her on the bed, turning to sit cross-legged facing Mike.

"Okay, what is it?" Mike asked, hoping he didn't look as terrified as he felt. The look on El's face told him that whatever she had to say was important.

"I haven't been completely honest about everything that I did when Max and I went to visit Robin a couple weekends ago," El began.

"What are you talking about?" Mike asked slowly, unsure of where this was going and trying to stop all the worst-case scenarios that were playing through his mind. El took a deep breath and reached out to lay her hand on top of Mike's.

"We went to a party at some big house," she started.

"A frat house?" Mike offered. El thought back to the Greek letters that had been displayed on the front of the house.

"Yes," she replied. "I don't know what was in the red drink they had there, but I had a few cups of it and I started to feel... weird. I was happy, and I couldn't stand still."

"You got drunk," Mike chuckled. El nodded; Robin had pointed out it

was El's first time being drunk. "Was that all?"

"What do you mean?" El asked.

"You said you had something to tell me. Was it just that you went to a party and got drunk for the first time?" Mike asked, feeling like there was more that El wanted to say.

"Are you not mad about that?" El studied Mike's face, and he genuinely did not look upset with her.

"I mean, I would've liked to be there with you your first time to make sure you were careful, but no I'm not mad. I trust you," Mike explained, leaning forward to kiss El's lips. El didn't respond to the kiss, but she sat unmoving while Mike's lips brushed against hers. Mike pulled back, confused by how El was acting, when he saw on her face that she had more to say.

"Mike, do you ever think about other girls?" El asked.

"What?" Mike managed, dumbfounded by the question.

"Do you ever wonder what it might be like to be with someone else?" El clarified after a long exhale. Mike's eyes widened in shock and his mouth dropped open halfway.

"Is this about Lindsey?" Mike asked, hoping El hadn't gotten the wrong idea in the car earlier. "I promise she's just a girl in my class."

"It's not about Lindsey," El replied, though learning about Lindsey had helped El consider the idea that Mike may be interested in other girls. "Just please answer the question."

"No... No, of course I don't think about being with anyone else," Mike said. "Why would I?"

"We've just been together for so long, and I'm the only girl you've ever been with," El explained.

"Yeah, so? I'm the only guy you've ever been with too," Mike said. He watched her face while she avoided eye contact with him, and he felt as though a ton of bricks hit his stomach when he made a certain

realization. "Wait. Do you... do you want to go out with other guys?" He felt himself holding his breath, waiting for El's response as she continued to stare at the ground. El's mind was racing, and suddenly, the confusion she had been feeling disappeared, and she knew what she had to do. Slowly, her eyes moved up to meet his, and in them Mike could read the answer to his question.

"I just think it might be good for us both if we try to see other people for a while," El explained. She heard the words as they rolled off her tongue, she and Mike learning in that same moment that El had decided to break up with him. Mike leaned back against the wall and blinked his eyes quickly, trying to keep the tears from forming.

"Who is he?" he demanded.

"Who is who?" El asked, confused.

"The other guy," Mike said, standing suddenly from El's bed and pacing a couple steps before turning to face her.

"What? Th-there is no other guy," El replied, scooting to the edge of the bed and looking up at Mike.

"Bullshit," Mike spat. "There's gotta be a reason you feel this way all of a sudden. Who the fuck is he?"

"Mike, I promise, there isn't another guy," El said sincerely. She felt the knots in her stomach again as she realized how badly she was hurting him.

"Then why?" Mike asked, his voice breaking. He swallowed the lump forming in his throat before continuing. "Why are you suddenly interested in other guys? Am I not good enough for you anymore?"

"Baby, that's not it," El said quickly, grabbing one of his hands in both of hers and pulling him down onto the edge of the bed next to her. She looked straight into his tear-filled eyes and felt her own heart breaking from the pain she was causing him. "I just think that some time apart will be good for us. We've only ever been with each other, and the last five years have been everything I could've asked for in life. You saved me."

"Then why?" Mike repeated, causing El to wince at the pain in his voice. "We've been together too long? You're bored of me? You don't love me anymore?"

"Stop it," El said as tears started to fall down her cheeks. "You know I love you. I love you so much. But I don't want one of us to wake up one day twenty years from now and regret never seeing what else was out there. I want us to both be one hundred percent positive--"

"Okay, well I am one hundred percent positive. El, I don't care what else is out there. You're the only thing I want in life. I will never regret being with you twenty years from now, thirty years from now, hell, eighty years from now. I don't have any doubts, El. So don't you dare sit here and try to act like you're doing this for me," Mike said. He watched El bite her bottom lip as she tried to hold back as many tears as she could, and when more tears began to spill down El's face, Mike couldn't help but soften with her. "El, please don't do this. I love you more than anything else in the world." El was silent for a long moment. She knew in this moment that she could stop this; she could change her mind and stay with Mike. She could apologize and say she was wrong. But something inside of her told her that this was something she had to do. No matter how much she loved him and how much this hurt, El knew that she had to follow this gut instinct that was telling her to take all the time and space that she needed. She just knew that she would never put these feelings of guilt and wondering to rest otherwise. She only wished she didn't have to break Mike's heart in the process.

"I'm sorry, Mike," El whispered through her tears. "The last thing I ever want to do is hurt you. But I need to do this. I just need some time to figure out what I want." Mike sniffed and wiped the tears from his face.

"Fuck it," Mike muttered as he stood from the bed once again. "Take all the fucking time you need, El."

"Mike..." El stood from the bed and lifted her hand to reach out to him, but Mike jerked away before she could make contact.

"Don't touch me," he said firmly. "I need to get out of here." Mike threw El's bedroom door open and stormed into the hallway, leaving

El alone in the middle of the room consumed in her own tears. A moment later, she heard the front door slam shut.

Mike took quick, long strides from the Byers' front door to his car. By the time he was seated behind the steering wheel, he had lost what little control he had left over his tear ducts. Mike laid his arms on top of the steering wheel and rested his forehead against them, his body shaking while he sobbed. He started trying to take some deep breaths to calm himself. The last thing he needed was for El to follow him outside and see him broken down like this. Mike leaned his head back against the driver's seat and stared blankly ahead out the windshield. El's words echoed in his mind, and a wave of nausea ran through his body at the thought of El with another guy. He shook his head, trying to shake that thought out of his mind, and he knew that he needed more answers. Mike looked at the front door and knew he couldn't go back inside. He couldn't face El again. He wouldn't be able to get any words out before dropping to his knees and begging her to stay with him, and Mike refused to look that pathetic. Mike closed his eyes and replayed the start of the conversation. This all started because of a party she had gone to with Max. He opened his eyes and turned on his car, driving to the only person who would be able to shed some clarity on the heartbreak he had just endured.

Mike pounded on the front door of the Sinclair house. A moment later, Lucas opened the door and was surprised to see Mike standing on his porch. His welcoming smile faded into concern and confusion when he saw Mike's red eyes.

"Is she here?" Mike asked.

"Is who here? What's wrong? Mike, what happened?" Lucas asked as he stepped to the side, opening the door wider. Mike ignored his friend's questions and stormed quickly past him and toward the living room.

"Max? Max, are you here?" Mike called out as he made his way to the living room. When he turned into the doorway, he saw a perplexed Max looking up at him from the couch, her mouth opened to respond, although when she saw the look on Mike's face, she could not find any words to say.

"Hey, what's going on?" Lucas tried again.

"I need you to tell me everything that happened at that party you and El went to that weekend," Mike demanded, pointing at Max. As heartbroken as Mike was, all he could feel in that moment as he stared at Max was anger. Maybe it was just easier for him to be angry at Max than at El.

"Seriously, Mike? You're this upset that your girlfriend went to a party? Let her live a little," Max said, leaning back against the couch cushion.

"El broke up with me today," Mike spat, and he noticed that Max's mouth dropped open in shock.

"What?! Man, I am so sorry. Did she say why?" Lucas asked, firmly patting his hand onto Mike's shoulder.

"She said she thinks it would be better for both of us to see other people. She wants us to be sure about each other so we don't wake up in the future regretting only ever being with each other," Mike explained.

"So what does a party have to do with any of that?" Lucas asked in confusion.

"Right before she told me she was interested in seeing other guys, she told me she and Max had gone to a frat party," Mike replied, staring accusingly at Max. "So I want to know what happened at that party."

"Nothing happened at the party!" Max exclaimed. "We went, we drank, we danced, we had a great time. It was the most fun I've seen El have in a while, actually. Until..."

"Until what?" Mike demanded.

"El and I were already a bit tipsy at this point, and a couple of guys came over and asked us to dance," Max began. She noticed Mike tense up at the mention of the other guys. "She started shaking her head to say no, but I said yes and dragged her with me."

"Why the fuck would you do that?" Mike yelled, feeling his blood

begin to boil again.

"Because dancing is fun, and El needs to be able to have a good time even when you're not around," Max replied defensively. Lucas gave Mike's shoulder a squeeze, and Mike took a deep breath to calm himself before Max continued. "Anyway, El and I were dancing together, and she wasn't even paying any attention to either guy. But then after a while, one of them started dancing with me and the other started dancing with El. She was still doing okay until he started kissing her neck-"

"He did WHAT?" Mike bellowed, taking a step further into the living room. He clenched his fists tightly at his side as he thought about another man kissing El's neck. Mike knows what that does for El, and he couldn't handle the thought of someone else making her feel that way.

"As soon as he started kissing her, she realized what was going on and she pushed him away. She started freaking out, and we left. Nothing happened, I swear," Max finished.

"Nothing happened?" Mike repeated. "You encouraged her to dance with some random guy, and then she practically cheated on me with him, and then she hid it from me for almost two weeks until she finally broke up with me so she can see other guys?!"

"She did not cheat on you," Max rolled her eyes and stood from the couch to face Mike. "She stopped it as soon as he crossed the line, and she ran to the bathroom and bawled her eyes out. You didn't see her face afterward. She felt so guilty."

"Okay, great, she felt guilty because she knew it was wrong to do that while she had a boyfriend. So of course the easy solution is getting rid of the boyfriend so she can go fuck whoever she wants without feeling guilty," Mike yelled.

"She is not just going to go around fucking other guys," Max insisted with another eye roll. "She just wants to get out there a bit and see what's out there. She's been tied down to one person since she was twelve years old, and she wants a break from that. Is that so wrong?" Mike was silent as Max's words processed in his mind.

"Did you know she was going to break up with me?" he asked as calmly as he could.

"No," Max answered quickly. "She and I talked about it a bit in the car on the way home, and I told her that it wouldn't be a bad idea to consider seeing what else is out there, but that she should only do it if she thinks it was something she really needed to do."

"I can't believe this," Mike muttered, running his hand through his hair. "This is the second time you've talked El into breaking up with me. Just because you were sneakier about it this time doesn't mean you didn't know exactly what you were doing getting in her head like that. I don't know what I ever did to make you hate me so much-"

"I do not hate you, Michael. I just want what's best for El," Max said. "As you know, she is her own person. If she didn't think we had some valid points, then she wouldn't have considered our advice."

"We?" Mike asked.

"Me and Robin's roommate Abby," Max explained hesitantly.

"A girl who has never even met me was telling El to break up with me?" Mike clarified angrily.

"She was just saying that El should be absolutely sure about being with you, especially since you've been together so long. Abby knows what she's talking about from experience. She and her boyfriend dated for three years before they broke up for other people," Max said.

"Abby and her boyfriend probably didn't go through nearly half the shit that El and I have," Mike pointed out. "You guys had no right to do that. If I had known it was going to be twenty-four hours of shit-talking me and pushing El to dump me, I-"

"You what? You wouldn't have let her go?" Max interrupted, placing her hands on her hips angrily.

"That's not what I was going to say," Mike said.

"Sure it isn't," Max said sarcastically. "For the record, I didn't make

this decision for El, but I completely support it."

"Max!" Lucas hissed. Max jumped and faced her boyfriend, surprised by his scold, as he had remained silent through the entire argument.

"What?" Max said before turning back to Mike. She sighed deeply before addressing him again. "Look, I know you don't believe me, but I am not out to sabotage your future with El. If this is what she feels like she needs to do, I support her. And I think it will be good for her to know what it's like to be a single girl in high school. Honestly, Mike, it'll be good for you too. You've never had the chance to go out with another girl. I think this really has the potential to help both of you. At least once you both have someone else to compare it to, you'll know if you're sure about each other."

"I was sure about El without the help from your little experiment," Mike said.

"Well, you should want her to be sure too," Max replied calmly. Mike sighed and ran his hand through his hair again.

"I'm going home. I need to think about everything," he said.

"Are you going to be okay?" Lucas asked.

"No, I'm not okay. But I'm not going to do anything stupid," Mike replied, turning to leave the living room. As Max sat back down on the couch, Mike stopped and turned to face her once more. "Max, just do me a favor and stay away from me for a while. I don't want to see you." Lucas walked with Mike to the front door, and after Max heard the door close, she was rejoined by her boyfriend on the couch.

"I can't believe you got yourself involved in their relationship again," Lucas said, shaking his head.

"El is my best friend. I told her what I thought was right," Max defended herself. "So please, don't lecture me. I just spent the last part of my evening being screamed at."

"He's just hurting right now. Give him some time," Lucas said about Mike. He put his arm around Max, and she rested her head on his shoulder. "Did El really not tell you she was going to go through with

breaking up with him?"

"No. I really thought she was just going to stay with him," Max replied, sitting up. "Which reminds me, I'm going to go call her and make sure she's doing okay." Max got up and went into the kitchen to call El and hear her side of the breakup.

**0-0-0**

**A/N:** Many of you already suspected this was coming, so I hope my die-hard Mileven shippers aren't too angry with me! Personally, I am a huge Mileven fan, but I thought this had a lot of potential to explore. Thanks for reading so far, and please remember to leave me a review and let me know what you're thinking!

### **3. Chapter 3**

**A/N: Thank you for your reviews on the first two chapters. There were a lot of anonymous Guest reviews, and many of you are taking the words right out of my mouth about certain things to come in this story haha. I hope that you enjoy this chapter!**

**Stranger Records: True, Max did not force El to do anything. And thank you for your thoughts on what Mike may or may not do. So many possibilities!**

**Grievesforyou: I'm glad you like it!**

**Nighting Ryder: Yes, it is definitely sad for both of them. We'll have to see what happens!**

**39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star: I knooooow : (**

**Niko: Yes, I have a pretty strong idea of who you may be resenting right now haha. Thank you for the compliment, even though the turn of events of the last chapter may have been difficult.**

**Strangerthingslover13: Thank you so much! I am glad you like it, and there are tons of opportunities for angst and jealousy coming up. Don't you worry.**

**Phieillydinyia: I know it did : ( And we will have to wait and see!**

**Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or any of its original characters.**

**0-0-0**

The next morning, El tried to act as normal as possible, despite how tired she was from her lack of sleep. She only ate a few bites of her Eggo's before throwing them away saying she just wasn't hungry. Yet, when Joyce asked her if everything was okay, El smiled and nodded, simply saying that she kept waking up overnight. El and Will left for school, and Will kept sneaking glances at his sister as she sat in the

passenger seat, her head leaning against the window, not saying a word.

"El, I heard a lot of yelling last night. You don't have to tell me what happened, but if you need anything, you know I'm here for you," Will said gently. El looked Will's way and nodded her appreciation, swallowing hard and not daring to speak about what happened last night. The rest of the ride to school was silent as El worked to mentally prepare herself for how different things were going to be. Who was she going to talk to during the day or sit with at lunch? The boys were all Mike's friends first, after all, and even though Max was her best friend, she was dating Lucas. Will pulled into a parking spot, and when El walked inside the school and approached her locker, she breathed a sigh of relief when she saw Max waiting for her, leaning against her locker door.

"Good morning," Max greeted her.

"Is it?" El yawned, opening her locker and getting her things ready for her morning classes.

"You look exhausted," Max observed, looking at El's droopy eyes and lack of makeup.

"I couldn't sleep," El explained, and Max nodded her understanding.

"Well, like I said last night, I'm proud of you for doing what you need to do for you. And don't worry about Mike. He'll get over it eventually and stop being such a dick," Max said with a wave of her hand.

"Mike is not being a dick," El came to his defense. "How was he supposed to react? One day he thinks things are completely normal, and then the next day I'm breaking up with him. It's not like he had a warning."

"I guess you're right," Max relented, cocking her head to the side. "So do you want to meet at my locker after fourth period for lunch?"

"You want to go to lunch with me?" El asked surprised.

"Of course. We eat lunch together every day, why wouldn't I?" Max

laughed.

"I just figured you would go with Lucas and everyone like normal," El shrugged. Max offered El a sad smile when she realized that El had expected everyone to take Mike's side and abandon her, and it seemed like El had accepted that was going to happen.

"I see Lucas enough as it is. The boys can eat by themselves," Max assured her. "Besides, Lucas isn't too happy with me for my *involvement* in yours and Mike's relationship."

"I'm sorry. Maybe I shouldn't have brought your name into it at all," El said sincerely. When Max had called her the previous night, asking if El was okay, El had been surprised to learn that Mike had left her house to go confront Max. Max told her that things got pretty heated, and El had started to feel guilty.

"It's okay," Max smiled. "It would've come out eventually. What's done is done." Just then, the warning bell rang to signal that only three minutes remained before the start of first period. Max and El parted ways, El heading toward her English Literature class.

El slipped into the classroom and took her normal seat in the second to last row. She hoped the teacher planned to lecture the whole period and not expect a lot of classroom involvement, because El was finding it difficult to stay awake already as she sat at her desk. She wondered how she was going to be able to focus on anything over the next seven hours. Mrs. Malone walked in as the bell rang, and the students grumbled as she instructed them to open their anthologies so she could introduce a new unit.

"I know you're all excited for the Edgar Allan Poe unit that I promised you next month to lead up to Halloween, but this is the last unit you have to get through before we start that one," Mrs. Malone said. "We're going to study two works of William Shakespeare. The first will be Hamlet."

"If she makes us read Romeo and Juliet, I'm going to gag myself," El heard someone mutter behind her.

"The second will be Julius Caesar," Mrs. Malone concluded. El

chuckled when she heard a relieved sigh and "thank God" from behind her. For the next forty minutes, Mrs. Malone had the students follow along in their anthologies as she gave them an overview of Shakespeare's life and writing style. Before wrapping up for the day, she passed out a worksheet to correspond with the section of Hamlet she instructed the students to read that evening.

As El was packing her books back up, she snuck a glance behind her at the boy who was leaning against the back wall waiting for the bell to dismiss them. He was tall with light brown hair and a square jaw. After a moment, his green eyes darted from the clock on the wall down to El, and El felt herself blush when he caught her looking at him. She quickly looked away and swung her backpack over her shoulder, staring straight ahead at the door, feeling the boy's eyes on her. When the bell rang, El walked quickly out into the hallway and disappeared into the swarm of students.

A couple hours later, fourth period had come and gone, and El was walking toward Max's locker to meet for lunch. She wasn't surprised that she had made it the whole morning without seeing Mike, as none of their classes were shared, and El made it a point to walk directly from class to class without spending any unnecessary time in the halls. She knew she would see him at lunch though. There was no avoiding it. El wondered how he was doing, though she was sure she knew the answer. Knowing from Max what Lucas had witnessed last night, El wondered what he and Mike had told Dustin and Will. Before she could worry too much about what the boys were thinking and saying about her, El was joined by Max.

"You ready to go?" Max asked, shoving her belongings into her locker. El nodded, and the two girls walked toward the cafeteria, Max babbling about an essay she had to finish by the end of next week. Max and El stood in line to get their food, and while Max was grabbing them each a drink, El scanned the room for a table to sit at. Max rejoined her and pointed at a small table near a window on the far wall, and the two girls went to claim it.

"So how are you doing? Any better than this morning?" Max asked.

"Hm? Yeah, I'm fine," El said absently as she continued to watch the door. She bounced her leg anxiously as each student who wasn't Mike

entered the room. "Have you seen Mike today?" El turned back to face Max.

"Don't do this," Max said. "You can't be worrying about him and how he's doing. You did this for yourself, so you need to focus on yourself."

"I know," El sighed. "I'm just wondering if I made the right choice. I mean, I feel like I did. I still feel like this is something I need to do. But I also wish that I didn't, if that makes any sense. I just want to know that he's doing okay."

"It's normal to feel some regret right now. But the worst thing you can do is obsess over where Mike is and what he's doing. You feel like you did the right thing, and it will get easier with time," Max explained.

"Lucas, watch my food. I forgot to grab silverware," El's head snapped toward the unmistakable sound of Dustin's voice, and sure enough, she saw the curly-haired boy hurrying back to the beginning of the lunch line while Lucas settled his tray at the seat across from where Dustin had been. A moment later, Lucas was joined by Will who sat next to Dustin's seat, and El felt her stomach turn over when she saw Mike sit next to Lucas. His back was to her, so she couldn't see his face, but at least she knew he was here.

"Are you happy now?" Max asked, moving her hand in front of El's line of vision to direct her gaze back to their own table.

"Should I go talk to him? He didn't exactly leave on good terms last night," El said.

"No," Max replied firmly. "I know this is all new territory for you, so please listen closely and trust me. He does not want to talk to you right now. Going over there would only upset you and him even more. Just give it time, and I promise this will get easier for you."

"Okay," El nodded after a moment of considering Max's words. El tried to eat her lunch, but she kept finding herself glancing over at Mike, wishing he would turn around. As Max and El stood to gather their trays and leave the cafeteria, another familiar face caught El's

eye. She recognized him from her English class, and this time when he caught El's gaze, she did not look away. He and El maintained eye contact while he walked from his table toward the door of the cafeteria. From the boys' table, Dustin noticed El staring intently at something, so he followed her gaze to the guy who he recognized as Brad Connor, a basketball player in their grade. Mike wondered what Dustin was looking at, so he turned to see Brad walking by their table, seeming to hold a strong gaze with something. Mike turned to follow Brad's gaze and saw El standing at her table with Max, following Brad with her eyes, and Mike was certain he saw a hint of pink on her cheeks. As Brad exited the cafeteria, El turned to pick up her tray from the table, and she froze when she saw Mike with a look of disgust on his face shake his head and turn away from her.

"Do you know him?" Max asked excitedly. "He is hot!"

"Huh? Oh, uh, he's in my English class," El replied quickly. She watched as Mike and Will stood from their table, dumped their trash, and headed out of the cafeteria. Before Will left, he turned to El and shook his head, knowing El wanted to follow, but also knowing that she should not.

"You should talk to him. He's clearly into you," Max gushed.

"What?" El asked, snapping her head back to Max who was oblivious to everything other than the connection El had just had with Brad.

"The guy from your English class. I'm sure everyone in here felt that heat," Max said.

"That's what I'm afraid of," El muttered under her breath before addressing Max. "I'm not ready to talk to anyone right now."

"El, you broke up with Mike so you could see other people," Max reminded her.

"Yeah, but not the next day," El said.

"All right, fine," Max relented. "But try getting out there soon. And try making it with that guy." El sighed and left the table, Max following her out of the cafeteria.

For the last period of the day, El had study hall with Dustin. Ordinarily, the two of them would sit together, talking about their days and what they were doing as a group that evening. Today, El walked into the room and took her usual seat. She figured she would put the ball in Dustin's court and see if he chose to still sit and talk with her. While she waited to see him enter the room, El pulled out her algebra textbook and opened it to the page her homework was assigned on. A few minutes later, someone sat across from her at the table, and El was relieved to look up and see Dustin's face offering her a sympathetic smile.

"Hi Dustin," she grinned. "I was hoping you'd still sit with me."

"Why wouldn't I?" Dustin asked, perplexed.

"I just thought..." El let her voice trail off and shrugged her shoulders, hoping Dustin would know what she thought and wouldn't take offense to it.

"El, it's been five years. You're just as much my friend as Mike is," Dustin assured her. El was thankful to hear that.

"Thanks," she smiled.

"So, how are you doing?" Dustin asked sincerely.

"I'm okay," El sighed. "It's definitely a weird feeling. I know I said all of that stuff about spending time apart so we could see other people, and I still feel like that's the right thing to do. But I still find myself thinking of Mike all the time, and even if I felt ready to meet someone else, I don't know how I would even do that."

"It's going to take more than just one day for you to be ready to get to know someone else. I know the situations were different, but when Suzie and I broke up, it took me a couple weeks before I was interested in another girl," Dustin explained. "Granted, Suzie and I barely saw each other and only dated for about seven months. For you, it might take weeks, it might take a couple months. You'll know when you're ready."

"How is Mike doing today?" El asked, knowing Max would disapprove

but also needing to know.

"He's been better," Dustin said slowly, knowing it wasn't his place to give up much detail. "He got upset at lunch because he thinks there's something between you and Brad Connor."

"Who?" El furrowed her brow.

"The basketball player that you had that really sexual staring contest with at lunch," Dustin reminded her.

"Dustin, I didn't even know his name! He sits behind me in my English class, and I've never even spoken to him before," El explained.

"Listen, all I know is what we all saw, and Mike was not happy about it," Dustin shrugged as El groaned.

"Should I tell Mike there's nothing going on?" she asked.

"If you want my honest opinion, no. You broke up with him to see other people. Now you just need to do whatever you need to do for yourself, and he needs to have his time and space to heal," Dustin replied. El nodded her understanding. Dustin seemed to agree with Max that El should leave Mike alone, and El knew that they were right. It was just so hard for her.

"So, could you help me with this?" El changed the subject and gestured toward her algebra textbook. Dustin scooted his chair around, and for the remainder of the study hall they worked together on homework without mentioning Mike's name again.

When the final bell rang, El and Dustin parted ways. El stopped at her locker to gather what she needed to take home for the night, and she walked her familiar path to the other end of the long hallway. She stopped when she reached Will's locker so she could wait for him, but she still had a clear view of Mike's from where she stood. El found herself glancing toward Mike's locker every few seconds, hoping to catch a glimpse of him so she could see for herself how he was doing. Suddenly, El's breath caught in her throat when she saw Mike approach his locker, walking with a girl that El had never seen

before. She had auburn hair that reached the middle of her back, and she was wearing a big smile which showed off her perfectly straight white teeth. El thought the girl was really pretty, and she was standing with Mike at his locker, talking to him while he got whatever he needed. Will finally joined El at his locker, and El spoke before Will could greet her.

"Who is that girl with Mike?" she asked. Will glanced down the hallway.

"That's his lab partner Lindsey," he replied. El nodded, remembering that Mike had said he was going to the library with Lindsey after school today to work on their chemistry assignment. That conversation seemed like it had taken place years ago with everything that had changed in the past twenty-four hours. El watched as Mike closed his locker and walked side-by-side down the hall with Lindsey.

Mike and Lindsey were sitting next to each other at a table in the Hawkins public library with their chemistry books and lab notebooks spread open in front of them. Their assignment was to complete the lab report on the experiment they had done the previous day in class, and Mike knew he had promised Lindsey he would try to explain things better to her. The truth was, he had all the information he needed in his notebook to just hurry up and finish the lab report himself. He had considered offering to do that and just adding her name to it with his, but he knew if he had cancelled meeting with her at the library, all he would do was go home and dwell on his situation with El. He couldn't believe she wanted them to see other people. Mike had thought they were both on the same page; that they both wanted the same future together. The idea that El could be with another guy and that he himself could be with another girl would have seemed preposterous to him. But Mike had seen the look on El's face when she had locked eyes with Brad Connor in the cafeteria today. Mike had felt the heat from several tables away, and it had made him sick to his stomach. He couldn't believe that El was ready to move on the very day after she had broken up with him. He also couldn't believe that he had listened when El told him there was no other guy... Mike wasn't stupid. He began tapping his pencil on the wooden table while he wondered how long El had been drawn to

Brad before she had finally ended their relationship so she could go after Brad without guilt.

"Mike?" Lindsey's voice broke through Mike's thoughts as she placed her hand over his hand to stop the tapping of the pencil. Mike looked over at his concerned lab partner before slipping the pencil out of his hand and pulling his arm off the table, away from her touch.

"Yeah?" he responded.

"Are you okay? You've barely said a word to me," Lindsey said. She had noticed something was off with Mike today in their chemistry class, as Mike normally greeted her with a friendly smile and made several witty jokes throughout their class period. But today he had barely moved his eyes from his desk as he had sat slouched back against his chair with his arms crossed over his chest and the same dark frown on his face that he had now in the library.

"I just have a lot on my mind right now," Mike sighed. "I'm sorry. Let's get back to the report."

"Do you want to talk about it? Is there anything I can do to help?" Lindsey asked sincerely, inching closer toward him.

"No, it's just some shit I'll have to figure out on my own," Mike shook his head and leaned forward to rest his elbows on the table and pull his lab notebook closer to himself, wanting Lindsey to catch his hint that he was ready to just finish their assignment.

"Well if it's the same shit you were trying to figure out in class, it doesn't look like you've made much progress," Lindsey quipped. Mike shifted his gaze to meet Lindsey's, and she saw that he was not amused by her joke. "I just mean, sometimes it's easier to figure things out if you don't keep it all bottled up inside. Even if you don't want advice, if you just want to talk, I'm a really good listener." Mike stared long and hard at Lindsey's face and felt his guard fall a bit at her sincerity.

"Wow, you must really hate chemistry if you'd rather hear about my problems," he finally said with a small smirk, earning a chuckle from Lindsey as he closed his chemistry book, giving in to her.

"So what's going on?" Lindsey asked.

"My girlfriend broke up with me last night," Mike began. "We were together for almost five years, and she just ended it out of the blue."

"Oh, Mike, I'm sorry," Lindsey said gently, offering him a sympathetic look.

"Thanks," Mike muttered awkwardly, unsure of how else to respond.

"May I ask why she broke up with you?" Lindsey continued. Mike sighed and looked up from the table to make eye contact with the girl sitting next to him.

"She said she wanted us each to be able to see other people. That one day one of us could regret only ever being with each other instead of seeing what's out there," he explained.

"I'm guessing you don't agree with her," Lindsey said, and Mike shrugged his shoulders.

"I had never thought like that, and I never thought she did either. I mean, I know it's unusual for us to have been together for so long, being as young as we are. But, I guess I thought we were just lucky that we met when we did because not many people can say they've been with their soulmate since they were twelve years old," Mike saw Lindsey's lips stretch into a big smile, and his cheeks started to flush, embarrassed that he had just said something so personal. "I'm sorry, you probably think I'm so weird for saying that."

"No, not at all," Lindsey said quickly. "I actually think it's really sweet. Not a lot of guys would be so open. The fact that you're even thinking these things instead of trying to act all macho as if it doesn't bother you really shows how much you care about her."

"Well I don't know if you've ever actually looked at me," Mike jokingly gestured one hand up and down his torso and Lindsey followed with her eyes, "but being 'macho' is not exactly my strong suit. Unlike the jock she's drooling over now." Lindsey's smile disappeared when she heard Mike's tone change from humorous to bitter.

"Did she tell you she already found someone new?" Lindsey asked gently.

"No, but she didn't have to," Mike replied. "I saw her today at lunch fawning over Brad Connor. And the look he was giving her pretty much told me the feeling was mutual."

"He is such a tool," Lindsey rolled her eyes.

"Yeah, well, I guess that's what girls want, so it seems to be working for him," Mike said sadly, sitting forward and laying his hands on the table.

"Not all girls are into that," Lindsey corrected him.

"Well I never thought El was, but I guess she is now," Mike shrugged.

"If she is willing to give up a nearly five-year relationship with someone who loves her as much as you clearly do, just so she can lust after someone as shallow as Brad Connor, then she doesn't deserve you," Lindsey said bluntly, taking Mike aback. "I think she's going to regret doing this to you."

"Why do you say that?" Mike asked.

"Because she's clearly just drawn to that floppy hair and sharp jawline like every other girl who has ever had a thing for him. Once she realizes that his charm is only skin-deep, she's going to realize how great she had it with you. She'll remember how sweet and kind and funny you are, and she'll remember how you treated her because I'm sure you treated her like a queen," Lindsey said. She reached forward and took one of Mike's hands; this time he did not pull it away. "I promise you she's going to realize what she lost," Lindsey added softly. Mike looked into her brown eyes and offered her a small smile. He was confused and, frankly, a little scared by how comfortable he felt speaking with Lindsey like this. Mike abruptly sat straight up in his chair and pulled his hand back.

"We, uh," he cleared his throat. "We really need to get this done tonight." Mike opened his chemistry book again and watched out of the corner of his eye as Lindsey studied his face a little longer before

turning back to the table and pulling her notebook closer to herself.

Within two hours, Mike and Lindsey had finished their lab report, and Mike offered to give Lindsey a ride home instead of having her call her brother, who she had to share a car with, to come pick her up. On the ride to Lindsey's house, neither of them spoke anymore about El or the breakup. The next morning when Lindsey stopped by Mike's locker to tell him good morning, Mike introduced her to Lucas who had also been there. When Lindsey offered Mike a friendly smile and wave in the cafeteria as she walked past with one of her friends, Mike didn't even notice that a few tables back, Brad Connor was sitting down between El and Max to formally introduce himself to Mike's ex-girlfriend. And when Lucas teasingly nudged his elbow into Mike's ribs and suggested that Lindsey was clearly into him, Mike denied it. Within the next week, Mike would learn how wrong he was.

**0-0-0**

A/N: Thank you all for reading so far and for being patient between chapters. I'm really excited to be writing this story because I have it outlined almost completely (of course things are always subject to change), and honestly it's shaping up to be a loooong one. Hopefully you guys are here for the long haul and don't mind some heavier content coming up within the approaching chapters. I hope you enjoyed this one, and please remember to leave me a review!

## 4. Chapter 4

A/N: Thank you all for reading, and thank you so much for your patience between the last chapter and this one. I have been starting and stopping this chapter for a couple weeks now, and I wanted to make sure it was ready for you before posting it. I want to thank you all for your kind feedback! I hope you enjoy this chapter just as much.

Stranger Records: This update wasn't quite as fast, but I will do my best! And yes, we will now start to see Mike and El's experiences with moving on/trying to move on. How bumpy could that be?

Grievesforyou: Well how fair would that be? Lol. I'm glad you like it!

Nighting Ryder: Yes, it seems a little fast, but they are 17 and emotional and both completely new to being single. I guess we will have to see how things go for them!

Jane Eleanor Wheeler: I don't have a specific number of chapters that I am shooting for, but I have an outline with all of the content I plan on including, and there is a lot there. So I haven't decided if I am going to opt for much longer chapters to include more content per update, or keep around this length of chapter and just have more chapters in the story. I'll have to feel it out as I go. I am glad you like it though!

39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star: Everyone loves Mike and El being together! I'm glad you are enjoying the story though.

Niko: You definitely raise some good points!

Crutio: Thank you so much, I am glad you like it!

Phieillydinyia: Remember, it is new to them. I hope you enjoy this chapter!

Strangerthingslover13: I can assure you there will be jealousy on

**both sides coming up! And I will definitely PM you; I'd love to hear your thoughts!**

**Milevena:** Absolutely, there will definitely be trust issues. We'll have to see how that plays out.

**HarleyGrove:** Thank you. I am glad you are enjoying it so far. Breaking Mike and El up is hard, but there is so much opportunity to explore.

**JayneFawn:** Exactly! Plus Mike and El are both new to being single, especially as teenagers. We may see Mike change his mind about moving on, but who is to say that would happen without drama?

**Exploding Helmets:** Don't worry, plenty of angst to come.

**Ad23:** If that's the case, I hope you like this chapter!

**Also thank you to all the anonymous Guest reviewers.**

**Disclaimer:** I do not own Stranger Things or any of its original characters.

## **0-0-0**

Throughout the week, Mike found it more and more difficult to disagree with Lucas's assumption that Lindsey had feelings for him. She stopped by his locker every morning to talk for a few minutes before school started, and she stopped at the boys' table every afternoon at lunch for a few minutes as well. In chemistry, she had begun touching his forearm when speaking to him, and she walked with him after class until the hallway split and they had to go their separate ways to their own lockers. For a while, Mike was able to excuse most of this as a friendship, especially since he had opened up to Lindsey. Certainly, she was just making sure he was doing okay. But one day, about a week after Mike had told Lindsey about he and El's breakup, she made a move that Mike couldn't pretend was platonic.

"Homecoming is coming up," Lindsey said one day after class as she and Mike walked down the hallway from the chemistry room. She

gestured toward the homecoming flier posted on the wall, and Mike followed her gaze then looked down at the floor.

"Yeah, I guess it is," he observed, having not thought of homecoming at all since El broke up with him.

"What are your plans for homecoming?" Lindsey asked innocently, turning the corner to her locker as Mike continued to walk along with her.

"I don't know. I guess I don't really have any," Mike shrugged. He certainly had not imagined going to his senior homecoming without El by his side.

"I don't have any plans yet either," Lindsey continued. Mike turned to face down the hallway, missing the expectant expression that Lindsey was giving him.

"Really? I thought you would be going to the dance for sure," he said.

"I don't have anyone to go with," Lindsey shrugged and intensified her gaze, hoping Mike would meet her eyes. When he did, Lindsey took a step closer to him before continuing. "Hopefully that changes though. I would love to have a date to the dance." Mike felt chills throughout his body as he tried to hide his internal panic. Was Lindsey hinting for him to ask her to the dance? Ever since the Snow Ball during his eighth grade year, El had been his only date to school dances.

"Y-yeah, I'm sure you'll find one, Linds," Mike stammered awkwardly. "Good luck." He turned to walk to his own locker, leaving Lindsey standing stunned behind him, and inwardly kicking himself at his own awkwardness.

"She asked you to homecoming?! Isn't the guy supposed to do that?" Dustin asked that evening as he, Mike, Lucas, and Will were gathered in Lucas's basement playing Nintendo.

"She didn't *ask* me to homecoming," Mike corrected him.

"No, but she made it very obvious that she wanted you to ask her," Lucas said.

"Is there any way she meant to offer to go as friends? People go to homecoming in groups all the time," Will offered logically.

"No, I don't think that's how she meant it," Mike replied, shaking his head and remembering Lindsey's soft brown eyes staring expectantly at him. "She literally asked me what my homecoming plans were, and when I told her I didn't know, she told me that she didn't know her plans yet either but that she would love to have a date to the dance."

"So?" Will shrugged.

"So, then she was just looking at me with these big puppy dog eyes like she was waiting for me to say what she wanted me to say," Mike said.

"And what did you say, exactly?" Lucas asked, since Dustin had interrupted Mike's story before he could finish it.

"I don't know, nothing really," Mike mumbled, trying to brush off the question.

"What do you mean nothing? This girl says to you 'Mike, I don't know what I'm doing for homecoming yet, but I would sure love to have a date to the dance,' and you just walk away? I don't believe that for a second," Lucas said, shaking his head.

"I mean, I didn't exactly say *nothing*," Mike said sheepishly. "I think I told her good luck or something lame like that."

"Good luck?!" Dustin repeated.

"What was I supposed to say?" Mike asked, exasperated.

"Um, how about 'Would you like to go to the dance with me?'" Lucas replied as if it were the most obvious answer in the world.

"But then she would've thought we had a date," Mike said.

"And what would be so bad about that?" Lucas asked. Mike sighed and rested his head in his hands. It had been over a week since El had broken up with him, and he had not spoken to her once.

"I just... I don't even think I'm going to homecoming this year," Mike said finally.

"Come on, it's our senior year. We've got to all go together," Lucas encouraged him. "Plus, it's been over a week now, and I know that's still pretty early, but you do seem to be doing better."

"I am," Mike admitted. "But that doesn't mean I'm ready to start dating another girl. I don't know when or if that'll ever happen."

"You don't need to date anyone. But if you see a cute girl and she happens to be into you, there's no harm in talking to her. And Lindsey happens to be a cute girl who is into you," Lucas pointed out. "Come to think of it, Lindsey may be the perfect girl for you to be talking to right now."

"How do you figure?" Mike asked, furrowing his brow at his friend.

"Think about it. She knows you just got out of a long relationship, so she won't be expecting much right off the bat. She already knows you're in a sensitive, vulnerable position right now. You could tell her that you want to take things slow and not jump into anything, and from what I know about Lindsey so far, she seems like she would be easy to have that conversation with," Lucas explained.

"She really would be," Mike sighed. He hated how correct Lucas was about this. Lindsey made him feel comfortable when they talked, and Mike knew he could be honest with her about what to expect and what not to expect.

"And who knows. You might start spending time with her and realize you're ready to move on quicker than you think," Lucas shrugged. "You'll really never know how you feel about it until you give it a shot. Move at whatever speed feels right to you, and make sure Lindsey's cool with it."

"I guess that's true. There's no rule that says how long I have to wait after a breakup before at least hanging out with another girl," Mike said slowly.

"And also, if you don't go to homecoming at all, you're going to sit at

home all night thinking about last year's homecoming with El, and you'll be wondering what she looks like and who she's there with. If you're there with Lindsey and all of us, your mind won't be anywhere near all of that," Lucas concluded.

"Talking to Lindsey really has been helping me a lot," Mike admitted. "I guess I could maybe talk to her about homecoming. But other than when we see each other at school, the only time we've ever spent together outside of school was last week when we went to the library to do our chemistry homework."

"That's a good point," Dustin muttered. "Why don't you invite her to come along with us next weekend when we all go to FearFest? We'll all be there, so it won't be like a date. Plus you and Lindsey will get to see what it's like to hang out with each other outside of school." Lucas and Will nodded along with Dustin's idea.

"I guess I could do that," Mike relented. The truth was that he felt guilty at the idea of getting too close to another girl, but he could see his friends made some good points. This didn't mean he was dating anyone; it was just getting him out of the house and out of school and having fun again.

"You're not doing anything wrong by doing this," Lucas said as if he had read Mike's mind. "I know you're not completely over her, but you *are* single now. It wouldn't be fair for you to just sit around waiting for her to figure her shit out. You need to get out there and do what's best for you too, and whether that eventually brings you back to El or to Lindsey or to anyone else, I'll support you entirely." Dustin and Will echoed Lucas's sentiments, and Mike offered an appreciative smile. He knew they were right.

Just then, the doorbell rang upstairs, and they heard the muffled sound of Mrs. Sinclair opening and closing the door and directing someone to the basement. At the unmistakable sound of Max's voice, Mike stood in preparation to go home.

"All right, well thanks for the advice. I'll let you know how it goes," Mike said to his friends as Max descended from the stairs behind him. "See you guys tomorrow." Mike turned to head toward the stairs, and Max shifted to her right to allow him to pass her.

"You don't have to leave just because I'm here," Max said when Mike was already on the second stair. He stopped as if he were about to say something to her, but he decided against it and hurried up the rest of the stairs.

"What are you guys up to tonight?" Max asked as she took a seat on the couch.

"Not a lot," Lucas replied, gesturing toward the Nintendo. "We were just talking about FearFest next weekend."

"Mike is cool with me going, right? It seems like he still hates me," Max pointed out.

"I'll talk to him about it tomorrow, and I really think he'll understand," Lucas assured her. "Plus, he's going to ask a girl from his chemistry class to come along too."

"He's *what*!?" Max exclaimed, her eyes widening. "Does he like this girl? Is he dating her?"

"He's not dating anyone," Lucas replied calmly. "And he definitely likes her as a friend and is curious enough to want to get to know her better. What does it matter?"

"It doesn't to me," Max shrugged. "Are you encouraging this?"

"If you can encourage your best friend to do what you think is best for her, then I can encourage my best friend to do what I think is best for him," Lucas retorted, shutting Max up. "Besides, you know Mike. I think he's going to take it slow. But it'll be good for him to at least get out there and talk to another girl while El is doing whatever the hell she's doing with Brad."

"What do you mean?" Max asked, scrunching her face in confusion.

"We all saw that look between El and Brad the day after she broke up with Mike," Lucas said. "And I've seen the two of them walking in the hall together a few times."

"You guys are ridiculous," Max scoffed. "El barely even knows the guy. When they locked eyes in the cafeteria that day, she literally

didn't even know his name. He didn't introduce himself to her until another day when he sat down toward the end of lunch, and even then he basically just said hi and that his name is Brad."

"Seriously? What about everything else?" Lucas asked.

"Everything else? You mean the fact that you've seen them in the hallway a few times? I didn't realize walking down the hall with a guy meant you were sucking his dick," Max spat defensively.

"Oh stop acting so mad. You know damn well you would encourage El to go out with Brad in a heartbeat, and I'm not convinced that you aren't trying to get her to do just that," Lucas accused his girlfriend, and the look on Max's face told Lucas that he was right. "It's only fair for both of them to try move on, as much as the whole thing sucks."

"I guess that's true," Max said slowly after a moment. "I can't expect Mike not to try and see what's out there after I told El how important it was to do that." When they had reached that agreement, their attention turned toward the Nintendo, and the topic of Mike and El was not brought up again the rest of the evening.

The next couple of days at school, Lindsey acted normally toward Mike. She did not mention homecoming again and did not bring up their awkward interaction in the hall. Mike was happy about that and took it as a sign that Lindsey understood why he reacted the way he did and that she wasn't upset with him. Friday after class, the two of them were walking toward Lindsey's locker, and Mike knew that this was the day he was going to ask her to join him and his friends the following weekend. He had been rehearsing in his head all day what he wanted to say to her. Mike wanted to make sure that Lindsey knew he wanted her to go, but he didn't want her thinking it was a date. So the phrasing had to be just right.

"I am so not ready for that quiz on Wednesday," Lindsey was saying as she opened her locker.

"Oh, yeah, me neither," Mike said absentmindedly. Lindsey shot him a confused look.

"Well then whose paper am I supposed to look at?" she joked. Mike

didn't react to her joke, but Lindsey noticed the nervous look on his face and turned to face him in concern. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Mike replied quickly. "I just – I mean, we – uh, my friends and I... Dustin, Lucas, and Lucas's girlfriend Max, we're going to FearFest next week on Saturday, and I... well I guess we... were wondering if you wanted to come." Mike tried to hide the disappointment from his face and he scolded himself in his mind for stammering so much. He saw Lindsey's smile grow, not knowing it was out of amusement at how pink his cheeks were turning.

"I would love to," Lindsey smiled. Mike released a sigh of relief, feeling proud of himself, even though he knew this wasn't a date.

"Great. So we can just pick you up next Saturday at seven," he said. Lindsey nodded her agreement, and shortly after, Mike parted ways with her for the weekend.

The following Saturday Mike, Lindsey, Lucas, Max, and Dustin pulled in to FearFest. Will had opted to stay at home, as he was not interested in voluntarily being scared after his experiences in the Upside Down. Lucas had driven the five of them with Max sitting in the front seat and Mike in the middle of Dustin and Lindsey in the back seat. Mike and Max had barely spoken to each other at all; the only reason Mike had not objected to Max coming was because of how accommodating Lucas had been in the couple weeks since El had ended things. Mike had not wanted to see Max, and Lucas had not put him in the situation where he would have to. Mike understood that Lucas really wanted Max to come along to FearFest tonight, so Mike had told himself that he would have a good time with his friends and focus on getting to know Lindsey better.

"What do we want to do first?" Lucas asked, looking at his ticket. There were three events: a standard haunted house, a cornfield, and a warehouse maze.

"I say we save the cornfield for last. It's the scariest," Dustin suggested.

"You guys have been here before?" Lindsey asked.

"Lucas and I have. Mike never came when he was with El," Dustin replied.

"El didn't exactly like places like this," Mike explained lamely, not wanting to disclose to Lindsey the specifics of El's life that made places like FearFest a bad idea. Lindsey nodded her understanding and glanced down at the ticket in her hand that Mike had bought for her.

"Let's start with the haunted house then," Lindsey recommended. The group started walking in the direction of the line for the house.

The estimated wait time that was posted was thirty minutes, so the five of them got some hot chocolate from the concession stand and settled in for the wait in the brisk early October air. Mike looked at the line ahead of them. It was full of friend groups goofing off to pass the time, and of course many clingy couples. Guys with their arms wrapped around their girls, pulling them closer either because of the cooler weather or to protect them from getting scared. He took a sip of his hot chocolate and turned to see Lucas standing behind Max with his arms around her waist from behind, holding her close to him.

"I'm telling you, the props and decoration in here are sick," Dustin was saying excitedly. "The haunted house is a great place to start. There are some jump scares, but it really prepares you for the other two attractions. The cornfield is fucking insane."

"The cornfield is the only one I'm actually nervous about," Max said. "I might need someone to keep me safe." She pulled Lucas's arms even tighter around herself, and Lucas dipped his head down to kiss her neck. Max started to giggle, and Mike turned away from them to stop himself from rolling his eyes. He hadn't expected Lucas to stay upset with Max forever, but Mike had felt appreciative when Lucas had taken his side over Max's regarding the breakup. Lucas's frustration with Max had subsided only about three days after El had dumped Mike, and Mike didn't want to think about what Max may have done to get back on Lucas's good side so quickly.

"They're so cute," Lindsey said, glancing toward Lucas and Max. Mike chuckled and shook his head.

"Yeah. Cute," he smirked.

"How long have they been together?" Lindsey asked.

"Off and on for about four years," Mike replied with a shrug of his shoulders. "She's actually El's best friend."

"Oh," Lindsey said quietly. She had noticed that Mike and Max weren't really speaking, and she had sensed some tension when they looked at one another, but she hadn't asked anything, as it wasn't her place. But now, Lindsey realized it made sense. Of course Mike would be uncomfortable hanging out with his ex-girlfriend's best friend. Lindsey had no idea that one of Mike's best friends was dating El's best friend. "I'm sorry, this must be pretty awkward for you."

"If you only knew the half of it," Mike muttered, not wanting to explain to Lindsey the direct role Max had played in his and El's breakup. "But it's fine. We're here to have fun. And I'm really glad you came, by the way."

"I'm glad I came too," Lindsey said, offering him a sweet smile. Mike felt his own lips pull into a smile at the sight of her big brown eyes beaming up at him. He felt his cheeks start to blush, and he turned his head away from her. Mike looked behind them to see Lucas and Max still in their own little world and Dustin behind them talking to a couple guys in line about the effects in the warehouse maze. Mike turned his attention back to Lindsey, and the two of them passed the time getting to know each other better. He found himself easily telling her things about his family, his hobbies, his favorite books and movies, and he found himself interested in hers as well. Mike could not remember the last time he had a conversation flow so smoothly with another girl, and he didn't even notice a half hour had passed by the time their group was next in line.

"Stay together; keep moving; no running; don't touch the monsters, the monsters won't touch you," the employee at the front of the line recited emotionlessly. After another moment, he allowed the group of five to enter the attraction.

Through the doorway, the path they had to follow was only wide enough for one person, so they were forced to walk single-file.

Lindsey ended up in front of Mike, followed by Dustin, and bringing up the rear was Max with Lucas still attached around her waist from behind. As they made their way around the curves the path led them through, Mike saw that Dustin wasn't lying about how intricate the props and decorations were. The first room was set as an actual living room, but the furniture was ripped apart and stained with blood. Blood streaks covered the walls, the television screen had a gaping hole in it that smoke was rising from, and there were two bodies laying on the floor which Mike couldn't tell if they were real people or props.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN MY HOUSE?!" shouted a sudden gruff voice as the door to their right swung open, and before them stood a deranged man with scraggly hair, ripped blood-stained clothes, and holding a large butcher knife.

"Holy shit," Mike breathed as Lindsey jumped and screamed in front of him.

"GET OUT OF MY HOUSE," the man growled, waving the knife. Mike noticed that Lindsey had seen the path was forcing them to walk right past this man and into through the door that he was still holding open, so she had stopped moving.

"It's okay. He can't touch you," Mike leaned forward and whispered to Lindsey.

"Let's go, little lady. The only way out is right through here," the man growled. Lindsey took a deep breath and started moving forward again slowly, the others following. As she passed the man holding the door open, he tauntingly wiggled the knife closer to Lindsey's face and sneered as she whimpered in fear.

Through the doorway, they found themselves in the kitchen of the house. It was dimly lit, and its walls were also covered in blood. The refrigerator door stood open, and it was filled with jars that held body parts in brownish liquid. As they walked further into the kitchen, another man, this one wearing a chef's uniform that was ripped up and stained in blood, abruptly slid out from under the counter and hollered a loud "GOTCHA" while grasping toward Lindsey's ankles, intentionally not making contact with her. Lindsey

screamed even louder, and in one swift motion she jumped backward into the air, spun around and buried her face in the chest of Mike's sweater. Mike's eyes widened in shock, and he slowly moved both his hand up to Lindsey's arms and gave them a light squeeze.

"You go first," she insisted and grabbed ahold of Mike's jacket to turn them so that he was ahead of her.

Mike led them down the path that continued through the house, up the stairs to the second level of the house, and through each room. Each room had its own set of monsters that jumped out to scare them, and some even followed them in the hallways. Being that he was in the lead now, Mike fell victim to several of the jump scares, and each time he jumped, he felt Lindsey tighten her grasp on his sweater. She was walking behind him, her arms wrapped around to his front and her body pressed against his back so she could hide her face in his jacket when she needed to. Mike's stomach was doing flips throughout the entire attraction, and he knew it was more from the way Lindsey was touching him than it was from the monsters.

"Didn't I tell you?! It was sick," Dustin said gleefully when the five of them made it to the exit and found themselves back outside in the chilled night air.

"It was pretty scary, wasn't it Lindsey?" Max asked, watching as Lindsey released her hold on Mike once they were a safe distance away from the building. Mike shot Max a warning glance, knowing that Lindsey's actions inside had not gone unnoticed by his friends, but hoping Max had the decency to keep her comments to herself this time.

"Yeah it was. I don't know how I'll be able to get through the cornfield if it's the scariest," Lindsey replied.

"Something tells me you'll be safe," Lucas smirked, moving his eyes back and forth between Mike and Lindsey and chuckling to himself as they both started to blush.

The next stop was the warehouse maze. After a forty-five minute wait, which was filled with the rest of the group getting to know Lindsey better this time, the five of them entered the attraction. It

was wildly different from the previous haunted house. There was no telling how many fog machines were being used, but the entire building was filled with extremely thick fog, making it impossible to see more than a couple inches ahead. Heavy metal music blasted through the speakers, so no one could hear each other in the fog, and the excessive strobe lights made seeing each other difficult as well. Mike reached out in front of himself and his hand touched a chain-link fence.

"It's a maze!" Dustin shouted, barely audible over the heavy metal that was blaring. He made a gesture with his hand to encourage Mike to go to the left, so Mike started walking, keeping one hand on the fence next to him.

Without being able to see more than a couple inches ahead, it wasn't long before the monsters started appearing before them and scaring the girls in particular. Max's face was buried in Lucas's shoulder, and she clung to his jacket with her eyes closed as one of the monsters inched his face closer and closer to hers. When someone jumped out in front of Lindsey, she jumped and screamed and reached out in front of herself for Mike, grasping his hand in hers. A moment later, Lindsey moved to pull her hand back, but Mike squeezed it, not letting her pull away.

"This way," Mike hollered, pointing in a direction that no one could see. He must have noticed they were in a dead end.

For another fifteen minutes, the five of them stumbled around the warehouse, trying to find the end of the maze. Max kept her face buried in Lucas's shoulder to avoid being scared by any of the monsters, and Lindsey kept a tight hold on Mike's hand as he led her through the maze. Dustin had joined Mike up front, and the two of them were focusing on the strategy of keeping one hand on the fence the whole time until it eventually leads to an exit. When they found the exit door and stepped back into the outdoors, Dustin nearly jumped for joy at their success.

"That was so much better than last year!" he exclaimed.

"I can barely hear you. My ears are ringing so bad from that place," Max complained, pulling on her earlobes.

"I thought you said the cornfield was the only one you were nervous about," Lucas teased his girlfriend. Max laughed and swatted his arm in return.

"Are you guys ready for the cornfield?!" Dustin asked excitedly, already heading in that direction. Lindsey and Max both had looks of hesitation on their faces, and Lucas met Max's with a look of amusement.

"You'll be fine," Lucas laughed, putting an arm around Max's shoulders. Mike, who was still holding Lindsey's hand, gave it a reassuring squeeze as they followed Dustin toward the final attraction of the night.

They reached the line for the cornfield, which boasted an hour wait. They entered the queue and instantly heard the air filled with the sound of chainsaws and screams coming from within the corn. Mike felt Lindsey jump, startled, next to him, and when he looked over at her he saw that she was also shivering.

"Are you cold?" he asked, gently rubbing his thumb over the back of Lindsey's hand, her fingers feeling like icicles intertwined with his.

"A bit. I'll be all right," Lindsey replied with a shrug. She felt Mike let go of her hand, and a moment later he draped his jacket over her sweater-clad shoulders. "Oh, you don't have to do that," she protested.

"Don't worry about it. I like the cold anyway," Mike insisted. Lindsey offered a gracious smile and slipped her arms through the sleeves of Mike's jacket. She let her hand dangle between herself and Mike, and after a moment she felt her pinky brush against his warm skin. Lindsey felt Mike's pinky tentatively wrap around her own, and a moment later, their fingers were intertwined again as they stood in the line holding hands.

When it was their turn, the five of them started into the cornfield. Dustin was the most excited, and he led them, followed by Max who had her arm wrapped tightly around Lucas's and was prepared to bury her face in his shoulder whenever needed, and lastly by Mike and Lindsey who hung back to experience being in the back of the group. The corn was taller than all of them, and the sounds of

chainsaws and screaming in the distance continued every couple of minutes. It was well into the night now, and if it weren't for the light from the moon and stars in the sky and the lights on the ground every few feet to illuminate the path, the cornfield would be pitch dark. The five of them stayed as close together as possible to avoid losing track of one another.

The cornfield donned demented-looking scarecrows, and Lindsey jumped when she saw one of the scarecrows emerge from the side of the path and stand next to Max who was looking the other way. Max felt someone's hot breath on her neck and turned to see the scarecrow inches from her face. She screamed and jumped to Lucas's other side to separate herself from the scarecrow, while Mike smirked and felt a pang of satisfaction at seeing her scared. They continued through the field, being startled by monsters who jumped from the corn, some of which even followed the group for a short amount of time, taunting them. After a while, the path in the corn opened up to a small clearing that was arranged as a cemetery. The cemetery was illuminated better, and the group was able to space themselves a bit. Suddenly, the roar of a chainsaw filled the air and a man dressed as Leatherface stepped out from behind a headstone wielding a chainsaw. All five of them jumped backward, alarmed, and Max dropped Lucas's arm and began running to the other side of the cemetery.

"Max, come back!" Lucas hollered. When Max looked over her shoulder at her friends, another man dressed in overalls and covered in fake blood emerged from the corn with a chainsaw and stood in front of Max. He started his chainsaw, and Max screamed and ran back to Lucas.

"Come on," Dustin urged, waving his friends to follow him through the cemetery to the other side where they could see the path continuing through the cornfield. As they walked rapidly through the cemetery, the two men with chainsaws continued to taunt them, revving their chainsaws and getting so close to the girls' faces that they could feel and smell the hot breath. Mike instinctively put his arm around Lindsey's shoulders and pulled her close to himself, and she wrapped her arms around his waist until they were through the cemetery.

"You okay?" Mike asked quietly as they stood at the edge of the path surrounded by corn. Lindsey let her arms drop from around him and nodded.

"Yeah, as long as there are no more chainsaws," she said. Mike chuckled and took Lindsey's hand again before continuing behind Lucas.

There were no more chainsaws, and they made it through the rest of the cornfield's turns and jump scares. Max let out a sigh of relief when they reached the exit of the cornfield, and Dustin was practically glowing from how much he had enjoyed himself. They piled back into Lucas's car, Max in the front passenger seat again, and Mike between Lindsey and Dustin in the back seat, as Lucas drove to drop Lindsey off first. Dustin rambled about how FearFest gets better every year and was comparing the effects of this year to last year. Mike had tuned Dustin out and was absentmindedly drawing circles with his thumb on the back of Lindsey's hand.

"Thanks for the ride. It was fun!" Lindsey said when Lucas brought his car to a stop on the street outside of her house. She opened the car door and began to step out. Out of the corner of his eye, Mike caught Lucas looking at him from the driver's seat. When Mike turned to face him, Lucas widened his eyes and mouthed the words "go with her."

"Hold on, I'll walk you up," Mike said suddenly, placing his hand on the door so Lindsey couldn't close it. He stood next to her on the street and closed the car door, and Mike and Lindsey walked side-by-side up her driveway to her front porch.

"I'm really glad you came tonight. I hope you had a good time," Mike said as they reached the porch steps.

"I really did. I liked getting to actually spend time with you outside of school," Lindsey replied. "Did you have fun?"

"Oh, yeah! It was tons of fun," Mike said. He looked over his shoulder and felt his friends' eyes on himself and Lindsey, and he started to feel his palms sweat.

"That's great. You really deserve to have a good time after everything

you've been through lately," Lindsey said gently, and as she looked up at him, the light from the porch light illuminated the small number of freckles on the bridge of her nose.

"Well you've been helping a lot with that, too," Mike said shyly, looking down.

"I have?" Lindsey asked, genuinely surprised.

"Of course. You're really cool and easy to talk to," Mike shrugged. "In fact, there's, uh, something I want to ask you."

"What is it?" Lindsey asked, taking a step closer to him. Mike took a deep breath and let it out and lifted his gaze to meet her brown eyes.

"Well, you know, homecoming is in a couple weeks. And I wanted to know if you wanted to maybe go with me," Mike said much more confidently than he felt. He felt nearly nauseous as he stood waiting for Lindsey's answer. He had not felt so nervous about a school dance since the first time he brought the topic up to El about the Snow Ball several years prior.

"I would love to," Lindsey replied with a warm smile. Mike released the breath he had been holding in a long sigh of relief and couldn't hold back his own grin as Lindsey took a step even closer, still looking straight into his eyes. Mike felt the butterflies begin to flutter in his stomach as his face began to inch closer to Lindsey's. Just as he felt the breath from her lips on his, Mike remembered that his friends were watching, and he instantly turned his head toward the front door of Lindsey's house.

"Okay," he said and cleared his throat. "Great. So, I'll, uh, see you at school then."

"Yeah, see you at school," Lindsey repeated, and Mike could detect a small amount of disappointment in her voice. "Thanks again for such a great night." Mike offered her another smile before telling her good night and walking back to Lucas's car, feeling happy with himself for giving it a chance with someone new. Maybe he would be able to move on after all.

0-0-0

A/N: I hope you enjoyed this chapter! We are now over a couple weeks post-breakup. I know that this whole chapter was focused on Mike, and the next one will focus more heavily on El. I don't anticipate the gap between this chapter and the next chapter to be quite as long as this last gap was, but I promise not to post until I feel it is ready. Please leave me a review and let me know what you're thinking so far!

## 5. Chapter 5

A/N: Welcome back! Thank you for all the kind reviews. There are a couple things that I want to address before I get in to the next chapter. I have been asked about the title of this story, so I want to quickly explain it. I am very self-aware, so I KNOW that one of my biggest flaws in my writing is titling my stories. Frankly, I suck at coming up with titles. So, I had completed chapter 1 and the outline with all the content I want to include in this story, and I was stuck because I didn't know what to call it. So, I was scrolling through my music on my phone, hoping to find some sort of inspiration, and I passed a song called "Tied Together With A Smile," and immediately, the chorus started playing in my head. The song is basically about a girl going through a rough time and trying to appear strong on the outside, and the last line of the chorus says "You're tied together with a smile, but you're coming undone." Given the things that I have planned for El to go through in this story, I decided it was fitting. (I would also like to add that I DO NOT own the song; it belongs to Taylor Swift). Lastly, this chapter is going to show El's life during the events of chapter 4. At the end of this chapter, Mike's and El's stories will be back on the same timeline. I hope you all enjoy!

Strangerthingslover13: I will take that as a compliment : )

Stranger Records: Thank you! I am glad you enjoyed it.

JayneFawn: Your assessment of Mike is pretty spot-on. And Max is an odd one. We'll certainly get to see her make some more questionable decisions.

Grievesforyou: I love Lucas. I know in the show they paint Will as Mike's best friend, but I really appreciate Mike and Lucas's friendship.

Jane Eleanor Wheeler: Thank you for understanding, and I am glad you liked it.

Nighting Ryder: We are certainly in for quite the ride!

**Phieillydinyia: I am glad you liked it!**

**Abby: Thank you for sharing your prediction! Of course, I'm not going to tell you if you're right or wrong. We'll just have to wait and see : )**

**Danny: Oh, the quick decisions inexperienced people make. We'll have to see how this plays out for El and Mike.**

**39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star: Don't give up hope!**

**Niko: The story is still young. And I am a huge Mileven fan. Do with this information as you will : )**

**Alisea: Thank you so much for your kind comments! I am glad you are enjoying it.**

**Vambrace: I agree. And thank you!**

**Mik El Max: I am glad you like it!**

**Jean Sumnerland: Didn't a wise man once say the hurt is good?**

**Ad23: Ah, the first person to worry about Lindsey. I'm glad you're liking the story, and I hope you like this chapter!**

**Thank you to the Guest reviewers as well!**

**Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or any of its original characters.**

**0-0-0**

In the weeks between El breaking up with Mike and Mike asking Lindsey to homecoming, El was working through her own obstacles of adjusting to being single. She really hadn't known what to expect, but Abby and Max had sounded so optimistic that El was confused by how much she was struggling. She still hated how badly she had hurt Mike, and she often found herself thinking of him, wondering how he was doing, and wishing she could just talk to him, but everyone told her not to. Max had told her that it would be difficult at first adjusting to not spending time with Mike, but that it would get easier

as the days passed, and that sooner or later El would meet someone new. El had not expected to feel attracted to another guy as quickly as she did. When she had first seen Brad in her English class, El was shocked by her own urges. She had known there was a guy who sat behind her in class, but El had never really taken the time to pay him, or any other guy, any attention. That day when she heard him cracking jokes behind her and complaining about reading Shakespeare had been the first day El had really looked at anyone other than Mike. She didn't actually *like* this guy... she didn't even know him. She just knew he was attractive, and for the first time in five years, she acknowledged that attraction.

After her talk with Dustin in their study hall the day that Mike had gotten upset at lunch, El had decided that she was not going to pursue anything with Brad. She could not deny that he was attractive, and even though she had broken up with Mike, she still cared about him and did not want Mike thinking anything had been going on between her and Brad. Max remained persistent, trying to persuade El to get to know Brad.

"You have class together every day. It would be your perfect shot," Max would gush despite El's objections.

Max's encouragement skyrocketed after Brad had joined El and Max's lunch table toward the end of their lunch period the day after they had made their first unspoken connection. El had just forced herself to finish her sandwich, still not overly interested in eating, and she had heard Max gasp. When El looked at her best friend, Max was gesturing her wide eyes to El's right. As El turned, Brad placed his hand on the back of an empty chair at their table.

"Is this seat taken?" he had asked. El had shaken her head and waved her hand toward it, offering it to him.

"You're in my English class," he had stated matter-of-factly, to which El nodded. "I don't think I've ever caught your name."

"My name is El," she responded with a polite smile.

"It's nice to meet you, El. I'm Brad," Brad flashed a smile and extended his hand. El tentatively took his hand in hers and

swallowed when his large hand encompassed her smaller one in a firm handshake.

"Forgive me, but are you new here? I would think I would've noticed you around a while ago," Brad asked after releasing El's hand.

"I was new last year, but this is my second year here," El explained.

"Huh. Not sure how I missed you," Brad said, and El did not miss how his eyes flicked up and down her body rapidly. "I know you said you've been here a year, but if you want someone to show you around, I'm your guy. I know a lot of places I'm sure you've never been."

"I'm, uh, actually not new to Hawkins, just to the school. I've spent a lot of time in the town," El explained, starting to feel uncomfortable with the way Brad's eyes were burning into her.

"Well, my offer still stands. There's always a hidden gem in every small town, and I'm sure you haven't seen it all," Brad continued.

"I'll keep that in mind," El smiled politely. The bell rang signifying that their afternoon classes would be starting soon.

"You do that," Brad said. "I'll see you in English tomorrow." He stood from the table, and Max and El watched as he walked away.

"Okay, he is obviously into you," Max said once Brad had walked out the cafeteria door.

"He doesn't know me, and he was staring at me pretty intensely," El said, standing from the table and gathering her tray. "Plus, I don't need shown around. I know Hawkins."

"He was flirting with you, El," Max said amused. "He's not trying to take you on a tour of the city or anything. That was his way of trying to get you to agree to go out with him some time."

"Really?" El asked, furrowing her brow as she dumped her garbage in the trash can.

"Yes, really. It's called game, and guys like Brad have it," Max said,

tossing her tray on top of the trash can and walking into the hall with El.

"I don't know. Obviously, he's attractive, and I know I'm supposed to get to know other guys, but isn't it too early?" El asked. Max looked at her friend and saw that El's eyes were pleading for Max to try and empathize with how she was feeling.

"Do you feel like it's too early?" Max asked slowly.

"It's only been a couple of days. I was with Mike for so long," El said. She was silent as she tried to think of words to describe the internal conflict she was feeling. She missed Mike so much, and part of her wanted to go back in time a few days and stop herself from breaking up with him. On the other hand, she knew that Max and Abby's advice would keep ringing in her ears until she explored what they had told her about. But El didn't know how to explore other options or when she should even try to start.

"Listen," Max said gently, noticing the mental turmoil El was putting herself through. "I don't want you to think that I am trying to rush you into anything. Just know that I'm proud of you for taking a risk like this and even considering exploring your options. Take your time, and make sure you're comfortable before putting yourself in any position with another guy."

"Really?" El was genuinely surprised by this change in Max's demeanor. In the days since El had broken up with Mike, Max had been nothing but encouraging of the idea of El getting out there immediately. It had seemed like Max wanted to allow no time for El to heal from the breakup.

"Really. When Lucas and I break up, it usually helps me to go out with a guy pretty quickly because then I am not wallowing on mine and Lucas's problems and letting Lucas consume my mind. But you are different from me, and this is new to you. If you need to take it slower, by all means, take it slower," Max explained sincerely.

"Wow. Thanks, Max," El smiled.

"Of course. Just, you know, don't take it too slowly. You never want

your ex to move on to someone new before you do," Max laughed.

"Do you think Mike would do that?" El asked, the concern spreading rapidly over her face.

"I mean, theoretically he *could* because he is single now too. But I wouldn't worry about that if I were you. Come on, who is Mike going to go out with?" Max replied, trying to lighten the mood after unintentionally instilling worry in El. She thought it best not to relay to El that she had also brought up the idea to Mike of seeing other girls the night he came over to Lucas's house and yelled at her after the breakup. It's not like that was something he was going to actually do.

Over the rest of the week, El sat in her English class daily and felt Brad's eyes on the back of her head. There were a couple of days when he walked with her to her locker, asking if she had given his offer any more thought. El smiled politely on each occasion and told him she was not interested at this time. One particular day, El was walking down the hallway with Brad slightly behind her on her left, and Brad was telling her that if she didn't want to go out in town with him, she should at least come see one of his basketball games. El was hearing Brad's words, but she caught Lucas's familiar eyes through the crowded hallway, and her stomach sank at the hint of disapproval that she detected.

"So what do you think?" Brad asked.

"Huh?" El turned to look up at him apologetically.

"Would you want to come see one of my games? Maybe next weekend?" Brad offered. El arranged her books in her locker while trying to think of what to say. She had never been to a basketball game before, and she could take Max with her. But at the same time, she still had some reservations about agreeing to do anything with someone new just yet.

"Hey, El," Dustin said with a friendly smile as he and Lucas walked past El and Brad. Both El and Brad's heads turned quickly toward the chipper voice, and El quickly smiled and raised her hand to wave as the two boys continued down the hall. El could have sworn she still

detected disapproval in Lucas's gaze.

"You know them?" Brad asked, scrunching his brow.

"Yeah. That's Lucas and Dustin. They're my friends," El explained.

"What's a pretty girl like you doing hanging out with those nerds?" Brad asked, leaning against the lockers and raising his eyebrows. El would have liked the compliment of being called pretty, but she felt defensive for her friends that Brad had just insulted.

"They're nice guys. And they're my boy – er – my *ex*-boyfriend's friends," El said, the 'ex' feeling so foreign on her tongue.

"You dated Zombie Boy?" Brad asked incredulously.

"His name is Will," El corrected him coldly. "And no, not him."

"So then the Wheeler kid," Brad deduced. "Matt? Mitch?"

"Mike," El said firmly. She shifted her books impatiently in her arm as she waited for this conversation to end.

"Mike, that's right. Well, congratulations on getting out of that one," Brad scoffed.

"Are we done here?" El asked, noticeably annoyed.

"Oh, come on, I didn't mean anything by it. I just meant that now you have the chance to see how a real man treats a lady," Brad said, the corners of his lips curling into a grin as he winked.

"I'm leaving," El said, disgusted. This is how guys talk to girls? This is what Max and Abby wanted her to experience? El turned to walk away from Brad when he grabbed her arm and turned her around to face him.

"El, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, okay?" Brad said, and El thought he sounded sincere. "I won't say anything more about him. I do think you're really pretty though. What do you say about coming to one of my games?" Brad was looking at her with puppy dog eyes, and El couldn't help but swoon, even though she was still not okay with

what he had said about Mike and her friends. Then again, maybe he had just been trying to crack a joke to make El feel better. After all, she had called Mike her ex-boyfriend. A lot of girls enjoy talking badly about their exes. How was Brad supposed to know El wasn't one of them? Even so, something still felt off, so El offered a polite smile and shook her head.

"Thank you, but I'm just not ready yet," she said. Brad hung his head and let out a sigh.

"I understand," he relented. "When you are ready, you know where to find me." El nodded as Brad walked away down the hall.

After school the next day, El was sitting in her room working on her homework when she heard a knock on the doorframe. She turned and saw Will standing in the doorway, and she smiled and beckoned him inside.

"What's up?" El asked, closing her textbook and adjusting to sit cross-legged on her bed, facing Will who had taken a seat on her desk chair.

"I just wanted to see how you're doing. We haven't really had the chance to talk much lately," Will said. "I wanted to remind you that I'm still here for you if you need anything."

"Thanks Will," El smiled. "I really am doing okay though."

"That's good to hear," Will replied, and El noticed the sympathetic smile he offered her. She studied his eyes to try and read what he was keeping from her, but she came up with nothing.

"What's going on?" El asked slowly. El watched as Will's face changed from sympathy to panic, his eyes widening.

"D-do you not know?" Will stuttered.

"Do I not know what?" El demanded, her spine starting to shiver.

"Didn't you talk to Max today?" Will asked.

"Yeah, I know she's going to FearFest with the guys next weekend."

She went over to Lucas's last night after she left my house," El said. "She told me you, Lucas, and Dustin were all there and that Lucas was going to talk Mike in to letting her tag along."

"That's all she told you?" Will probed. El's heart skipped a beat as her mind began to race. What had Max not told her? Was it about Mike? What happened?

"Yes. Will, what is it?" El asked firmly. Will took a deep breath and let it out, looking El in the eyes.

"It's not really a huge deal, and it might not lead to anything," Will began and El felt her heart rate increasing with anticipation. "But, Mike is asking Lindsey to go along too."

"W...what?" El asked, barely above a whisper. She started to feel nauseous, and her breathing was becoming rapid as she thought of Mike with Lindsey. El had seen Lindsey before; she had seen the two of them together. Mike had promised her that Lindsey was just a friend.

"El, I'm sorry, I thought Max would've told you," Will said gently.

"Does he like her?" El asked. She watched as Will bit the inside of his cheek while trying to figure out what to say. "Just tell me the truth."

"Well, he definitely likes her as a friend. She... kind of brought up the idea of homecoming to him, and now he's... uh," Will said carefully.

"He's what?" El demanded, feeling her blood boil as she swallowed down the lump in her throat.

"He's asking her to FearFest so they can have the chance to hang out in a group setting before he decides if he wants to take her to homecoming or not," Will said quickly, convincing himself to just rip off the band-aid.

"Oh," El said, sounding defeated. She tried to calm her breathing, but she could not stop the sting of tears in her eyes, and Will noticed her reddening face as the first tear dropped down her cheek.

"Hey, it'll be okay," Will soothed, moving from the chair to the edge

of El's bed, draping an arm around her shoulders. El rested her head on Will's shoulder and let the tears roll down her face while he squeezed her close to him.

"This isn't how any of this was supposed to go," El croaked.

"El, if you don't mind me asking, how exactly *was* it supposed to go?" Will asked gently. El took a deep ragged breath to calm herself and sat upright to face Will.

"I... I... don't know," El admitted, her cheeks red from a combination of crying and embarrassment.

"Then why did you break up with him in the first place?" Will asked.

"Abby and Max made it sound like such a good idea. They made it seem like I would break things off with Mike, and I would be presented with all these different options, and I would just know if Mike was truly the one for me or not," El said. "But I didn't realize how badly it was going to hurt me, and I definitely didn't think about how badly it would hurt Mike. And then after I did it, I didn't feel happy or free... And I didn't know where to start. Sure, there's that Brad guy who keeps hitting on me. But I just... Will, I don't know how I feel about anything. I just know that I never pictured Mike going out with another girl. God, I am so stupid."

"So... the way it played out in your head was you would break up with Mike, then all these guys would just come out of nowhere to take you out, then you would realize it wasn't what you wanted, and you would ultimately go back to Mike who was supposed to just be waiting around for this to happen?" Will recapped, scrunching his forehead and trying not to sound as insensitive as he was certain he sounded.

"I don't know how to explain it without sounding completely ridiculous," El cried. "I just... The idea was in my head that I had to see what else was out there because I had only been with Mike. But then, I didn't know how to go about seeing what else is out there. I didn't know where to start. It wasn't easy like Max and Abby made it sound. And now... I'm losing the one person I never thought I would." El's voice cracked and she buried her face in Will's shoulder again as

the tears started rolling down her cheeks once more. Will rubbed El's back while trying to process the information he had just received.

"El, I don't know what to say," Will said softly. El sniffled as she sat up to look at him again.

"What should I do?" she asked, and Will's heart hurt at the desperation in her voice.

"I don't know," he said honestly. "You can't ask Mike to not see Lindsey. That wouldn't be fair to him. You're not going to like this, but since you did break up with him, I think there's only one thing you can really do."

"What?" El asked.

"I think you should stop focusing on doing what Abby and Max got into your head. Stop worrying so much about dating other guys, and honestly stop worrying about getting back with Mike. I think a lot of this happened because of confusion on your part, and I really think you need to take some time to really focus on yourself and finding out what *you* need," Will explained. "If you end up dating someone else along the way, or if you end up back with Mike, then great. But I really think you need to focus on yourself for a while and learn who you are outside of being with Mike before you could really be happy being with anyone." El nodded as she considered his words.

"Are you going to FearFest with them next weekend?" El asked.

"No, I don't like places like that," Will replied, and El nodded her understanding.

"Okay. Well, I should really get back to my homework," El said, picking up her textbook again.

"Let me know if you need to talk about anything else," Will offered, standing and walking toward the door.

"Thank you, Will," El smiled as he left.

That night, El did not sleep well. Her mind was too conflicted with thoughts of her and Mike, Abby and Max's advice, Brad's persistence,

and Will's advice. El had not felt so lost in years, and she hated that the one person who she was the closest to was the person she could not talk to about it. El arrived at her locker the next morning, her mind still whirling, and when her best friend showed up and leaned against the locker next to hers, El couldn't suppress the anger that involuntarily filled her.

"Why didn't you tell me about Mike and Lindsey?" she demanded, turning to face Max. Max's mouth dropped open in shock at El's accusatory tone, and she saw El's anger and pain all over her face.

"I was going to," Max started, but El shook her head and slammed her locker closed, walking away.

"El, wait!" Max called, jogging after her and grabbing her arm.

"Who is Mike going to go out with?" El mimicked Max's words from days prior. "Isn't that what you said when you told me not to worry? And now he's asking her out next weekend, and you *knew* and kept it from me!"

"El, listen. He is asking her to come with us as a group, yes. It is not a date. I didn't tell you because I didn't think there was anything to tell yet," Max explained. "I was going to keep an eye on them at FearFest next weekend, and if there was anything to tell afterward, I was going to tell you everything. I promise." El studied her friend's face with pursed lips as she listened to Max's excuse. After a moment, El shook her head and looked at the floor.

"Whatever, Max," El sighed. "I can't worry about this right now. My head is seriously going to explode, and I barely slept last night."

"Come here," Max wrapped El in a tight hug. "I know this is hard, but I promise, I *promise* things will get better." El stared emotionlessly at the floor while her best friend hugged her. She decided not to point out that Max kept making that same promise, and it still had not begun to come true.

Over the next week, El did her best to follow Will's advice. She did her best to focus on her schoolwork, happily showing off her improved test scores in algebra and science. She also gave dating

little to no thought, doing her best to push the topic out of her mind when it entered. Will was right; she needed to find herself before she could date anyone. El did her best to maintain a happy face while at school, interacting with her friends like normal and smiling politely to people in the hallways. Brad did approach her a couple of times, and El remained cordial with him but continued to turn down his requests to hang out.

When the Saturday arrived that El knew her friends, along with Mike and Lindsey, were going to FearFest, she and Will went to the arcade together. El admittedly had a great time, having not gone to the arcade in months, and having not spent quality time with Will in nearly just as long. She was grateful that Will did not bring up their tearful conversation from the previous week, nor did he bring Mike in to the discussion at all. Outwardly, it would appear that Mike was not on El's mind at all; though she had just gotten better at hiding it. Truthfully, Mike was the one thing that El had not figured out how to push out of her mind. El and Will returned home from the arcade around ten o'clock that night, and El retreated to her bedroom. She found herself wondering if Mike and her friends were still at FearFest and if they were having a good time. More than that, she found herself wondering how things were going between Mike and Lindsey. As the nausea began to threaten her again, El did her best to force Lindsey out of her mind and go to sleep. She knew she would hear everything from Max the next day. If there was anything to hear.

The next day, Max came over to the Byers' house, and she and El went to El's room to talk and hang out. El was doing her best to appear as calm and collected as possible. She was still trying hard to follow Will's advice of focusing on herself rather than on boys, but she was also dying to know about Mike and Lindsey from the previous night.

"So, how was your night?" El asked casually.

"It was a lot of fun. I'm sure you'll hear from Dustin tomorrow in your study hall that a couple of the actors with chainsaws really scared me in the cornfield," Max replied with a laugh. "But we all had a great time." El nodded along with a smile and waited for her friend to continue. She could sense the hesitation.

"Is there anything... to tell? Now?" El asked, referencing their conversation from the previous week in school. Max sighed deeply; she had been thinking all morning about how to break the news to El. She decided it would be best to just lay it out for her.

"Mike and Lindsey were getting pretty close through each of the haunted attractions," Max began carefully.

"Close how?" El inquired.

"Close like... arms around the waist, holding hands, things like that," Max replied. El felt the fire burning in her stomach but maintained a calm face while she nodded.

"Did he kiss her?" El asked bluntly.

"No," Max replied quickly. She thought it would be best to leave out how close Mike and Lindsey had come to kissing on her front porch. "He did ask her to go with him to homecoming, though." El nodded and let out a long exhale before speaking.

"Thank you for telling me," she said. Max was quiet as she studied El's face, looking for any hidden emotions.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"I'm fine," El smiled.

El had another sleepless night that night. Mike might as well be dating Lindsey at this point. El's stomach was doing somersaults at the thought of Mike's hands on another girl, his lips on another girl's lips, his laugh being caused by another girl's jokes. Will's advice to stop worrying about boys briefly skirted through her mind, quickly in one side and out the other. She had to do something. Especially now that Mike had already been out with a girl once and had a homecoming date lined up. El thought back to Brad. He was very persistent, and she knew he would go out with her in an instant if she told him she wanted to. But, he was the reason Mike had gotten upset a couple weeks ago, and El had promised herself she wouldn't go out with him. Then again, Mike had also promised El that Lindsey was just a friend. Things change.

The next morning, El waltzed confidently to her locker and gathered her books for her morning classes. She had plenty of time before the first bell rang, so she walked down the hallway toward Brad Connor's locker. As she approached, she saw Brad standing in front of his open locker, and she took in the sight of his nicely combed hair and his sharp jawline. As fate would have it, El saw Lindsey standing in front of an open locker across the hall and down a ways. El chuckled inwardly at the irony of Brad and Lindsey's lockers being in the same hall. Right as El reached Brad, she saw Mike arrive at Lindsey's locker, a smile on his face as he greeted her.

"El," Brad said, surprised to see his morning visitor. El directed her attention to Brad, but she saw in the corner of her eye as Lindsey shut her locker door and Lindsey and Mike began walking closer.

"Good morning Brad," El replied. Her eyes shifted over Brad's shoulder again and made eye contact with Mike who was walking with Lindsey. She made sure Mike was within earshot before she confidently continued. "If your offer still stands, I am free every night this week." El could have sworn she saw Mike come to a complete stop for a second.

"How does tomorrow night sound?" Brad asked.

"It's a date," El smiled.

**0-0-0**

**A/N: So now, Mike and El's timelines are caught up. For most future chapters, I plan on having some of Mike and some of El; I will not be alternating regularly like I did in chapters 4 and 5. I do hope you liked this one! Please leave me a review, and I will be back with more when I can.**

## 6. Chapter 6

A/N: Welcome back! Thank you for all the kind reviews. I hope you enjoy this chapter. Let me know!

Phieillydinya: Yes, the kids really are good friends to each other aren't they? Even if they make some questionable decisions.

Stranger Records: Yes, Mike and El are both starting something new with completely different motivations. I'm glad you are enjoying it.

Grievesforyou: Unfortunately so : (

Jane Eleanor Wheeler: I agree. We'll have to see how it goes.

39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star: She's one of my favorites too! I understand not liking Brad, and don't give up hope!

: I agree. The poor girl is clearly confused.

Strangerthingslover13: I'm glad you enjoy the jealousy! And don't worry, Mike and El interactions will be coming.

SophieRock: I'm so glad you like it! I hope you enjoy this chapter as well.

Alisea: Thank you for all your thoughts! Will is definitely a supportive sweetheart. Mike and El each have quite a bit coming up ahead, so we'll see how it plays out.

JayneFawn: I'm interested in hearing your opinions on Brad after this chapter. And thank you for your compliments! I am glad you like the story so far.

Thank you as well to all the Guest and anonymous reviewers!

Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or any of its original characters. I do not own the poem *Annabel Lee* either, as it belongs to Edgar Allan Poe.

## 0-0-0

After school that day, El got a ride home with Max because Will was going over to Mike's house with the rest of the guys. The two girls hurried to El's bedroom so El could fill Max in on her plans with Brad. He had told El that he would take her to dinner and then take her to his favorite spot in town to watch the sunset. She relayed Brad's plans to Max with a giddy smile on her face, and Max became more aware of El's innocence and naivete than ever before.

"It sounds like you'll both have a good time," Max smiled. "But before you go on this date... do you want anything to happen or not?"

"What do you mean?" El asked, scrunching her forehead in confusion.

"El," Max sighed. "Guys don't just take a girl to watch the sunset."

"I've watched the sunset with Mike multiple times," El shrugged, and Max pursed her lips in frustration.

"Yes, and then you probably had sex in his car afterward," Max said.

"Not... every time," El blushed. "But what does that matter? You think Brad is going to try to do... that... with me?"

"I don't know for sure. But you need to understand that it is a very strong possibility," Max explained seriously. "So before you even go on this date, you need to decide for yourself if you want anything sexual to happen or not, and if so, you need to know what your boundaries are."

"Boundaries?" El repeated.

"Exactly how far you are willing to go," Max offered. "Especially on the first date." El nodded, her eyes wide with concern. She had not considered anything like this, and the confidence that she had felt earlier in the day was certainly rocked.

"I definitely don't want to do anything with him yet. I barely know him," El said definitively.

"Okay, that's fair," Max agreed, feeling relieved that El was able to

draw her own conclusion so quickly.

"What should I do if he tries anything?" El asked, the worry growing more apparent in her voice.

"Well, hopefully he'll ask before just diving in, but that's not always the case," Max began. El nodded, thinking back to the man who started giving her unsolicited neck kisses at the college party nearly two months ago. "If he tries something you aren't ready for, tell him to stop, and be honest with him. Tell him you're not ready or that you just don't want to."

"And if he doesn't stop?" El asked, remembering how persistent Brad was just to get her to agree to a date. Max was silent for a moment as she tried to figure out what to say. She herself had been in a situation the last time she and Lucas were broken up where a guy tried getting a little too handsy and did not want to stop when Max told him to. Max had rammed her knee into his stomach, and he immediately got the point. Max wanted to explain to El that it was okay to do what she needed to do to defend herself if she needed to, but she didn't want to scare her by bringing the idea of physical violence into the picture. Then, Max remembered just who she was talking to.

"Well then I guess it's a good thing you have superpowers," she said in a light-hearted tone, trying to lighten the mood she had created. It seemed to work, because El chuckled at her comment.

"I don't think it will come to that. I'm sure it will just be dinner and a nice evening before he drops me off back at home," El said.

"Yeah, you're probably right. I just wanted you to be prepared since this is the first guy you've gone on a date with since Mike," Max explained thoughtfully. El nodded her appreciation. After a moment of silence, curiosity struck Max at the thought of her previous comment. "Do you ever use your powers anymore?"

"Um, not a lot. But, sometimes," El replied, and Max thought she saw her friend's cheeks turning a light shade of pink.

"I figured you'd use them here and there for something small just to make sure they're still there," Max said. "Like turning the light off if

you're already in bed, or something like that."

"Yeah... something like that," El muttered with a grin as she avoided eye contact with Max, her cheeks definitely burning red now.

"Wait... what else *do* you use them for?" Max pressed. El couldn't control the smirk on her face while she remembered the last time she had used them a few months ago. She felt how hot her cheeks were as she responded.

"I, uh... may have used them every now and then... with Mike," El blushed. Max cocked her head and looked questioningly at El. She had an idea of where this was going, but she needed El to clarify. El sighed before adding, "Sexually."

"What?! How?" Max exclaimed curiously.

"I thought it would be fun to pin him down so he couldn't move," El explained, her cheeks still burning red as she avoided eye contact with Max who was staring at her with a look of shock on her face.

"Okay, I don't need to hear any more," Max laughed. "Let's just figure out what you're going to wear."

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, Mike, Lindsey, Will, Dustin, and Lucas were hanging out in Mike's basement. Lindsey was becoming a constant addition with them, and none of the boys minded, as they all enjoyed getting to know her, and they liked that she was seemingly helping Mike get over El. Lucas and Dustin were playing Nintendo while Will, Mike, and Lindsey sat on the couch behind them watching; Will had already announced he would be facing the winner of Lucas and Dustin's game.

"So where's Max?" Dustin asked Lucas.

"She went over to El's house," Lucas replied, focusing on the game he was playing.

"Probably so they can talk all about the date El's going on tomorrow," Mike added, hoping he didn't sound too bitter in front of Lindsey.

"Date?!" Dustin and Lucas both exclaimed, and Dustin quickly turned

to face his friends on the couch, instantly allowing Lucas to beat him at their game. "How do you know she has a date? Who is it with?"

"Who do you think?" Mike chuckled. "Brad Connor. And I heard about it at school." He shrugged, not telling them that he heard it directly from Brad and El in the hallway. Mike was almost certain El had done it in front of him on purpose, but he didn't want to say that and look extra petty or jealous, especially in front of Lindsey.

"I'm sorry, Mike," Dustin said sympathetically.

"You don't have to be sorry for me," Mike said, squeezing Lindsey's hand next to him, and she offered him a small smile. "Will's the one who lives with her and will have to see that asshole around if they start dating."

"Yeah," Will chuckled halfheartedly. He was fixated on the fact that El had a date already, and he felt slightly offended given the emotional talk they had recently had. Will had thought El was going to take it slow and just focus on herself instead of dating, and now she has a date with the one guy who she knew would upset Mike?

"Trust me, you don't want them to start dating," Lindsey said seriously, directed at Will. "He is not a good person. Obviously, I don't know El, and this isn't my place, but if you guys care about her, one of you needs to talk to her."

"That wouldn't do any good," Will said, shaking his head, bitter that the last time he had a heart-to-heart with El it clearly went to waste. "El's going to do what she wants to do."

"He is going to hurt her," Lindsey stated matter-of-factly.

"How?" Mike asked, the concern showing on his face.

"Not, like, physically or anything," Lindsey said. "But trust me, this 'nice guy' stuff is an act. He will break her heart if she lets him into it, and he will end up humiliating her."

The four boys exchanged worried looks with one another, curious of what Brad could do to humiliate El. None of them wanted to see her get hurt, but Will had a point; El wouldn't listen to any of them about

who not to date. Mike had an additional question in his mind; how did Lindsey know all of this about Brad? He felt it was best to wait and ask her after his friends had gone home for the night. The subject of El and her upcoming date was soon dropped, and they played Nintendo and hung out for another couple hours before Dustin, Lucas, and Will all left for the night, leaving Mike and Lindsey alone on the couch.

This was the first time that Mike and Lindsey had been left alone, and they had not discussed anything about what happened during and after FearFest a couple days prior. All Mike knew was that she had gotten quite comfortable with touching him during the haunted attractions, she had agreed to go to homecoming with him, and, of course, they had almost kissed on her front porch afterward. His friends were very accepting of her, and Mike genuinely enjoyed all the time he was spending with her. Yet now, here he sat, alone with Lindsey in his basement, her hand in his, and all he could think about was what Lindsey had said earlier about Brad Connor.

"Linds, can I ask you something?" Mike started tentatively.

"Sure, what is it?" Lindsey asked. Mike turned sideways on the couch so he was sitting facing her directly, still holding her hand.

"All that stuff you said earlier about Brad... you seemed really confident that he's a bad guy and that he would hurt and humiliate El. How do you know so much about him?" Mike asked carefully. He hoped that Lindsey wouldn't think he was hung up on El. This was more about his curiosity of Lindsey's knowledge of Brad. Did she have a friend who Brad had hurt in the past?

"I know because I dated Brad," Lindsey replied, looking at the coffee table. Mike's eyes widened in shock. He had not expected that. Lindsey took a deep breath and turned to face Mike before continuing. "It was sophomore year, and I hadn't really done a lot of dating. I'd had dinner or a movie with a guy here and there, but I'd never actually had a real boyfriend. Brad was in my geometry class. He sat next to me. It started innocently enough; he would ask me for help on a couple problems in the homework, and he started making jokes to me about the teacher. Just stupid stuff." Lindsey paused, and Mike squeezed her hand to encourage her to continue.

"He said I should go to one of his games sometime, so I did. He saw me in the stands, and each time he made a basket he would point and wink at me. He just did these little things to make me smile," Lindsey continued. "Then he asked me on a date, and I agreed. We went out a couple of times before he asked me to be his girlfriend, and I said yes. I was ecstatic. I was dating this hot, popular guy on the basketball team. It's a fifteen-year-old girl's dream." Lindsey said the last part with a laugh, and Mike noticed that her eyes quickly turned sad.

"He was my first boyfriend, and he was my first kiss," Lindsey continued quietly. "He kept wanting more and more physically, and I had never done any of it, so I wasn't sure I would know how, but he was persistent and kept assuring me that he would help me figure it out." Mike wrinkled his nose in disgust at how Lindsey was describing Brad, and he gently caressed the back of her hand with his thumb.

"He never actually *forced* me to do anything. If I really said no, he didn't force the issue. But he was just so persistent, and eventually... I did lose my virginity to him," Lindsey admitted. "And then a month later, I saw him making out with another girl in his car. I was devastated that he was cheating on me, and I broke up with him. Then other guys on the basketball team started giving me these creepy looks and smiles, and they started making sexual comments to me. It turns out, Brad told them everything we did... He told them stuff about me, how he was my first... How I looked. Just, everything. It was horrible."

"I am so sorry," Mike said softly, moving closer to Lindsey.

"It's just... it was bad enough that he cheated on me. That hurt worse than I'd ever hurt before. I didn't think anything could feel worse than that," Lindsey said. "But I was wrong. And I haven't dated anyone since."

"I don't blame you," Mike said sympathetically. "What a jackass."

"And I know not all guys are like him. In fact, I know *most* guys actually aren't like him. It's just that when you find one who *is* like him, it really ruins dating for you for a while," Lindsey explained. "But that was two years ago, and I've moved past it. But I think you guys should know the truth about who Brad Connor is so you can try

to save El from getting hurt... I know she is important to all of you."

"She *was* important to me," Mike corrected her. "I haven't said a word to her since she dumped me. I don't want her to get hurt either, but the only people she might listen to are Will... or Max. There's nothing I can do." Lindsey nodded her understanding, and Mike gazed at her in awe. Here she was, putting herself in a vulnerable position and telling him this personal information to try and protect Mike's ex-girlfriend from experiencing the same pain. Mike thought back to the conversation that he and Lindsey had had in the library the day after El broke up with him; Lindsey had said El didn't deserve to be with him and that Mike would find someone new. Yet more than a month later, Lindsey was looking out for El because she knew El was important to her new friend group. This girl must have a heart of gold.

"It's really sweet that you care enough to try to protect a girl you've never even met," Mike said.

"I still think what she did to you was wrong, but I wouldn't wish what Brad did to me on anyone. Even El," Lindsey smiled. "Plus, it helps you get to know a little more about me."

"Well I really appreciate that you feel comfortable enough to tell me something like that. And I am so sorry you went through that. I can't imagine how hard that was to go through," Mike said. "He's such an idiot. He was with someone as sweet and genuine as you, and he betrayed you like that. And like you said, not all guys are like that-"

"You aren't like that, I'm sure," Lindsey interrupted Mike's nervous rambling and looked into his eyes with the same expectant look she had given him in the hallway when she had first brought up the idea of homecoming.

"N-no. Of course not. I could never cheat on... anybody," Mike replied. He felt his stomach fluttering and swallowed hard as he noticed Lindsey had inched a little closer to him.

"I know you wouldn't. You're such a sweetheart. I think that's why it was easier to open up to you. I feel like... I can really trust you," Lindsey said softly and then bit her bottom lip, waiting for his

response.

"You can," Mike breathed. "I, uh... I really like you... and that's kind of scary to me because of everything that I just went through... and I don't want to end up hurting you." He gulped again and tried to keep his breathing steady, but the sight of her big brown puppy dog eyes looking into his and her biting her bottom lip was starting to awaken urges that he hadn't felt in quite some time.

"I really like you too," Lindsey said softly. She raised her palm to Mike's cheek and let her fingertips brush into his soft dark hair, not taking her eyes off of his. Lindsey moved even closer, and she could feel his breath on her own lips. A second later, the gap between them was closed as Mike connected his lips with hers. He let the kiss linger for a few moments, memorizing how soft her lips were and how she tasted of watermelon chapstick. When Mike pulled back, Lindsey nibbled on her bottom lip again, but she was unable to contain the smile that had formed on her face. Mike returned the smile as he lifted his hand to run his fingers through her long auburn hair.

"You are so pretty," Mike said softly. Lindsey smiled and blushed, and Mike leaned forward to kiss her again, tangling his hand in her long strands while Lindsey wrapped her arms around his neck. Mike felt Lindsey's tongue glide across his bottom lip, and he parted his lips to grant her entrance. She released a small moan in his mouth, and Mike felt electricity shoot all throughout his body as his blood started rushing south. Reluctantly, he pulled back from the kiss once again.

"I should really get you home," Mike said. It was true; it had gotten late, and it was dark outside. But Mike also knew he couldn't let things go any further tonight. He had a lot of feelings to sort out, and he didn't want any lines to be crossed that would be unfair to Lindsey.

"Okay," Lindsey nodded and stood to follow him upstairs so Mike could drive her home for the night.

After school the next day, El was in her room preparing for her date with Brad. She had the jeans and sweater that Max had helped her pick out the previous day laid out on her bed, and she was currently sitting in front of her vanity preparing to style her hair. Over the

years, El had grown more accustomed to traditionally female things like hair and makeup. Joyce had taught her how to use a curling iron and had gotten her one for Christmas during the year they lived away from Hawkins. Her makeup skills were learned from a combination of Joyce, Max, and Nancy, and they had gotten better with time. El generally wore a natural look anyway, but on certain special occasions, she would apply a full face. This evening, her first date with Brad, was one of those occasions. While her curling iron was heating up, El was sifting through her eyeshadow palettes, looking for a good color combination to complement the maroon sweater she would be wearing. Just as she pulled out the right palette, there was a knock on her bedroom door. She called a "come in" to the person on the other side, and Will walked in.

"When were you going to tell me about your date?" Will asked, leaning against the doorframe.

"Will," El sighed, her back to him as she looked at him through the mirror on her vanity. "I didn't see you last night, and it just never came up today. I figured you heard from someone else, or I would tell you this evening."

"I did hear from someone else. I actually heard from Mike," Will said. El felt her heart skip a beat. Mike *did* hear her and Brad in the hallway like she had hoped.

"How is Mike?" El asked casually, turning in her vanity to face Will. "How's Lindsey?"

"Is that why you're going out with Brad tonight? If it is, please stop this," Will said. "I thought you agreed that it would be best for you to take some time to yourself and not worry about dating for a while."

"Mike didn't seem to take much time. Did you give him the same advice? Or is it okay for him to have another girlfriend already?" El asked bitterly.

"Lindsey isn't his girlfriend. And maybe they are moving too fast too. But I'm here to talk about you right now, not them. You have to stop basing your decisions on what Mike is doing or what you think would make him jealous," Will said bluntly.

"That's not what I'm doing at all," El replied defensively. "I did start to focus on me. I've been doing better in school; I've spent more time with you and your mom; I've had more girl time with Max. It's been nice. But I'm seventeen. If I want to go out for an evening with a guy, there's no harm in that."

"So you going out with Brad tonight has nothing to do with Mike? It has nothing to do with him and Lindsey getting touchy-feely at FearFest over the weekend or going to homecoming together in a couple weeks?" Will asked accusatorily. "I know Max told you these things."

"No, it has nothing to do with Mike," El insisted. Will looked long and hard at her before letting out a deep sigh.

"I guess 'friends don't lie' doesn't apply anymore," he muttered under his breath.

"What's that supposed to mean?" El asked angrily.

"Look, it doesn't matter whether you're trying to make Mike jealous or not. There's something you should know about Brad before you go out with him tonight," Will said, trying to change the subject to what his original mission was before he entered the room. "Brad, he... he isn't as good of a guy as he makes himself out to be around you."

"What do you mean?" El asked skeptically.

"I mean he has a history of hurting the girls he goes out with," Will explained and then quickly clarified, "Emotionally."

"Will, it's just one date," El said.

"Yes but that can always lead to more. He's been known to cheat on girls and say horrible things about them to his buddies. He has really screwed some people over," Will continued. El chewed the insides of her cheeks for a moment while she thought over Will's words.

"Where did you hear this?" she asked.

"I know a girl who went out with him a while ago," Will replied vaguely. Mike had told Will an overview of what Lindsey had told

him last night. He didn't get into the personal specifics, but Mike wanted Will to know enough information to hopefully get through to El.

"So his ex-girlfriend is saying he's a bad guy? That's kind of a biased source. Of course she's not going to have nice things to say about him," El said, brushing off what Will told her.

"You're Mike's ex-girlfriend. If someone asked you about him, would you call him a bad guy, knowing that he's not?" Will asked.

"Of course not," El replied quickly.

"Then why would Brad's ex do that?" Will countered.

"I don't know, Will. Because some people just lie," El said exasperated. "I've made my mind up, and I'm going on this date. And not that it's any of your business, but Max already talked to me about going into tonight having set boundaries for myself. I'm not going to let Brad *do* anything."

"I know you're going to do what you want to do," Will said, admitting defeat when El said firmly that she would not change her mind about going on the date. "So just be careful. I don't want to see you get hurt."

"I'll be careful. But you don't have anything to worry about. I'm sure he is a genuine guy who has a bit of a bad reputation because he's a jock and some exes have said some lies," El shrugged.

"I hope that's the case," Will said begrudgingly. He felt deep down that it was not the case, but he couldn't change El's mind. He walked back into the hall, hoping that El wouldn't end up getting hurt.

At six o'clock, there was a knock on the Byers' front door, and Joyce opened it to see a handsome teenager she had never met. His light brown hair was combed, and he was dressed in khakis and a green sweater. He offered a friendly smile when the door opened to reveal El's adoptive mother.

"You must be Brad," Joyce grinned, extending her hand.

"I am," Brad replied, shaking her hand. Joyce stepped to the side to allow him to enter the living room which was empty of any other people.

"I'll go let El know you're here," Joyce said, excusing herself down the hallway. She returned a moment later with El who was dressed in jeans and a maroon sweater, a long silver necklace, with her makeup perfectly applied and her hair styled in large bouncy curls.

"Hi," El smiled when she walked up to her date.

"Hey," Brad replied. "You look beautiful." El saw his eyes travel up and down her entire form as he spoke.

"Thank you. You look great too," El said. El said goodbye to Joyce for the evening, and she let Brad take her hand and lead her outside and to his car. He politely opened the car door on the passenger side for El to get inside before walking around and getting in himself.

"I hope you like Mexican food," Brad said, reversing out of the driveway.

"I do," El replied. They rode into town where the Mexican restaurant was, having conversation here and there. El was a bit nervous and unsure of what to talk about. She had never really had a first date before. Her relationship with Mike had an unconventional start to it; there was no first date during an awkward getting-to-know-you stage. She thought it was odd that she and Brad didn't have a smooth conversation during the ten minute car ride, but she reasoned that it could be because Brad was nervous too, or that the radio was playing. El was sure that once the date got underway, the nerves would wear off, and things would go great.

"Okay, here we are," Brad announced as he pulled into a parking spot. He walked around and opened El's car door, and then he took her hand in his again and led her inside. Once they were seated and placed their orders, the two of them sat in their booth munching on the free chips and salsa.

"I really like that sweater. It brings out the richness of your eyes," Brad said, glancing between El's sweater and her eyes.

"Thank you," she smiled. "I like yours too. It's a good color on you."

"So, I have a question. Was that woman at your house Mrs. Byers?" Brad asked. El felt chills shoot down her spine as she remembered she never explained to Brad that she lived with Will Byers, who Brad had referred to as "Zombie Boy" when El had been resisting his advances to date her.

"Um, yes. I live with Will Byers and his mom," El said. She saw the questioning look on Brad's face and did not wait for him to ask before she continued. "Both of my parents are dead, and Joyce was close to them, so she took me in. I didn't have any other family."

"Oh. Well that was nice of her. I'm sorry to hear about your parents, but I'm glad you had an option here. If you'd gone into foster care or something, we probably never would've met," Brad said, reaching across the table and holding one of El's hands in his. She smiled as he caressed the back of her hand with his thumb.

"Yeah, I don't like to think about what could've happened if I didn't have Joyce," El said. That much was definitely true. El wanted to change the subject. Thinking about Hopper's death still made her emotional, and thinking about her incapacitated mother was not much better. "Where are we going after this?"

"You'll have to wait and see it for yourself," Brad said with a wink. "I know a place away from the rest of the town where I like to go to just get away, be by myself, and clear my head. It's so quiet and peaceful, and it has a great view of the sunset."

"That sounds nice," El smiled, and she felt Brad squeeze her hand lightly. Soon after, the server returned with their dinner, and the two of them began to eat.

When dinner was over, Brad paid the bill and took El's hand as they walked outside to his car. As they drove, it was already starting to get dark, so El figured they must not be far from where Brad was planning on going. She watched out the window as they drove by the Leaving Hawkins sign, and soon after, Brad turned down a path that El had never noticed. It was the type of path that you had to know it existed in order to see it, or you would pass it every time. Brad

continued to drive as the path wound through some trees, and after a few minutes, he reached a clearing which overlooked a river. Looking out her window, all El could see were the trees and the river; only nature. If she had not just left the Hawkins limits, she wouldn't have known a town was near them. Brad turned off the engine, and the two of them sat in silence in his car for a moment. They were facing west, and the river ran north to south, so the setting sun was reflecting on the water ahead of them.

"I can see why you like to come here. I'm sure not many people know about this place," El said.

"I told you. There's always a hidden gem you don't know about," Brad smiled, restating what he had said at the lunch table the first day he had introduced himself to El. "I like to come out here and just get away from all the bullshit at home and at school. It's a good place to relax... I actually do homework out here sometimes."

"Really?" El asked, and Brad nodded.

"It's just such a poetic setting. Since we're doing that Poe unit in English right now, I've been out here three nights in the past week and a half," Brad explained. "It just puts you in a whole different mindset and really lets you appreciate the art of what you're reading."

"Maybe I can try that with you some day," El offered sweetly.

"I can show you what I mean right now," Brad said.

"You brought your English book?" El asked incredulously, scrunching her forehead.

"No," Brad laughed. "But I've always been a fan of Poe's work. I have my favorite poem of his memorized... Here, take off your seatbelt, and just sit back and appreciate the sunset." El did as she was told; she removed her seatbelt and reclined comfortably in the passenger seat, looking out the windshield at the orange haze filling the sky and the reflection of the sun in the rippling water as Brad started reciting *Annabel Lee* in a low soothing voice.

*"It was many and many a year ago,*

*In a kingdom by the sea,  
That a maiden there lived whom you may know  
By the name of Annabel Lee.  
And this maiden she lived with no other thought  
Than to love and be loved by me."*

El sighed. Brad was right; this was a beautiful idea. She stared ahead as the sun continued to set, beginning to disappear behind the trees on the other side of the river and making the car they were sitting in even darker. She heard Brad shift in his seat next to her before continuing.

*"I was a child and she was a child  
In this kingdom by the sea,  
But we loved with a love that was more than love,  
I and my Annabel Lee."*

The sun had set; the inside of the car was dark, partially illuminated only by the light from the moon and stars in the sky. El felt that Brad had inched closer to her, and she turned her head to see his dark form facing her a mere inches away.

"That was beautiful," El said quietly.

"That wasn't the whole poem. I can continue if you'd like," Brad offered smoothly.

"That's not necessary," El smiled. She felt Brad's hand caress her cheek and run one of her curls through his fingers.

"I'm so happy we finally did this. You look absolutely stunning tonight," Brad said. His voice was deeper, and El thought it sounded quite sexy. She felt his hand that was in her hair tighten its grip on the back of her head and pull her toward him, his lips crashing into hers. El was taken off guard at first, but she quickly started

reciprocating the kiss, running her fingers along Brad's bicep as he tightened his fist around a handful of her hair. As El parted her lips and let her tongue meet Brad's in the middle, she felt his other hand find her thigh and begin rubbing it. El placed her hand on top of Brad's hand and gently removed it from her thigh. Brad did not break the kiss, and he did not return his hand to El's leg. He must have gotten the point.

"I'm so happy we did this," Brad repeated when he finally pulled back from the kiss. "You are so incredible."

"I'm happy too," El agreed, still in a daze from her first kiss in such a long time. Brad leaned forward to kiss El's forehead before starting his car back up and heading back in to town. The drive back to El's house was silent, and when they arrived, she was about to open the door and head inside when Brad reached out to stop her.

"Thanks for coming out with me tonight. I had a great time with you," he said with a smile.

"I had a wonderful time. Thanks for dinner and for sharing that place with me," El replied.

"Hey El, I know it's really late to be asking this because it's only like two weeks away, but do you have a date to homecoming yet?" Brad asked. She truthfully hadn't thought much of the homecoming dance and hadn't planned on going. She didn't want to go without a date, especially knowing Mike and Lindsey would be there together. And she hadn't even thought yet about what friend group she would go with. Max would be going with Lucas... would the two of them want to be in a group with Mike or with El? El was going to make everything easier by just not going.

"No, no I don't," El answered.

"Would you like to go together?" Brad asked. El pondered for a moment. "You don't have to decide right away. I just thought it would be fun, and we had such a good time together tonight, so I would love to see you again... I'd love to see you again before the dance too, actually."

"I would like that too," El agreed. "And yes, I'll go to the dance with you."

Brad smiled and pulled El in for a peck on the lips before bidding her a good night and waiting until she had entered the front door before pulling away. El walked directly to her bedroom and closed the door, leaning her back against it and sighing happily. She was right; the nerves went away, and she ended up having a great time. Max and Will had gotten her worried for nothing. Sure, Brad had kissed her, but she kissed him back and she enjoyed it. He had tried to make another move on her, but when she moved his hand off of her thigh, he did not try and cross that line again. He respected what she wanted, and El felt good about that. She had a good time, and she was looking forward to seeing him again. El felt better knowing that her friends were wrong; Brad was a nice, sensitive guy, and he wasn't going to hurt her or cheat on her. She just knew it.

0-0-0

A/N: Thank you all for reading so far! I hope you enjoyed this chapter, getting to see a bit of Mike and a bit of El. I will say, there are Mike and El interactions coming up. Also, some of you may have an idea of where you think things are going with Brad, and I want to make one point without spoiling anything yet to come: if you are hesitant to continue reading because of what you fear Brad may do to El, please know that I have some things that are off-limits when I'm writing, and *that* is one of them. Clearly, something unfavorable is going to happen to El, but I want to squash any fears you may have about me taking it that far. Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and I will have chapter 7 ready for you hopefully by next week!

## 7. Chapter 7

A/N: Thank you so much for being patient with me between chapters 6 and 7. I know I've never taken this long between updates before, but I've had a bunch of stuff going on in my personal life, and I just moved into a new place two weeks ago. Things are calmer now, and I will have regular time to write again! So be expecting consistent updates again.

Xfinnsfreckles: I feel honored that mine is the first Mileven breakup story you are reading! And of course I'm glad that you like Lindsey, and the rest of the story. I hope you enjoy this chapter.

Niko: I'm sorry to hear that :/

Phieillydinyia: We'll have to see what is in store for their love lives!

HarleyGrove: That's true, there are definitely always two sides.

JayneFawn: Very interesting thoughts! Hopefully you like where the story goes.

Simon Samovar: Thank you! Honestly, I am a huge Mileven shipper, and I enjoy reading and writing Mileven stories, but I agree. I wanted to try something different with their characters. So, here we are! I am glad you are enjoying it and that you like the addition of Lindsey.

Angenian: Thanks for reading, and I hope you enjoy.

Alisea: It's funny that you bring up how the boys are acting toward El, because that actually starts being addressed this chapter lol. I'm glad you like it so far!

39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star: I really enjoy reading everyone's takes on Lindsey and Brad. And I know, having Mileven apart is rough! I hope you enjoy this chapter.

Exploding Helmets: Things do seem peaceful now, don't they?

**Stranger Records:** I really enjoy reading everyone's opinions of my newcomers Lindsey and Brad. And that's very true; rebounds can get quite messy.

**Stories I Make:** Thank you so much! I am honored that my previous story inspired you like that. I will be on the lookout for your own story! Meanwhile, I hope you enjoy this chapter.

**Thebreeze105.5:** Well, don't write the eulogy yet or anything... And I don't mind Jopper. I actually support Mileven, Lumax, Jancy, and Jopper (I know, how original... literally the mainstream ships haha), but Mileven is my number 1 and the only one I really focus on in writing. In this story, though, I am sticking with the idea that Hopper died at the end of season 3, which is why he isn't there and El is still with the Byers family. Maybe in an upcoming story I will throw some Jopper in, since I have neglected it entirely in all 3 of my published stories.

Thank you, as well, to all of the anonymous guest reviewers!

**Disclaimer:** I do not own Stranger Things or any of its original characters.

**0-0-0**

El had told both Max and Will about her date with Brad, and they each had very different reactions. Max had thought the sunset and poetry was a bit cheesy, but she was thrilled that El had stuck to her boundaries and even more thrilled that Brad seemed to respect them. Will, on the other hand, did not hide his skepticism about Brad's behavior. He was certain that the sensitivity and poetry reciting was an act to make girls feel special so they would melt in front of him and do whatever he wanted. El had rolled her eyes at Will's reaction, telling him that he needs to accept that he was wrong about Brad, and that he is actually a good guy. Begrudgingly, Will relented, but he still told her to be careful.

The next week and a half passed smoothly. El went out with Brad two more times, and he continued to respect her boundaries. She also found time to go to the mall with Max so they could each buy their homecoming dresses in enough time so their dates could ensure they

had ties to match the dress color. At school, El saw Mike from time to time in the hallway with Lindsey, and she could tell by the increasing affection between the two that their relationship was growing. She tried to ignore any pang of jealousy by reminding herself that it was only fair for both herself and Mike to move on. She was happy getting to know Brad. Still, El found it difficult to tear her eyes away when she would see Lindsey's hands on Mike.

Three days before homecoming, El and Will got home from school, and Will shuffled through the pile of mail on the table, seeing an envelope with his name and one with El's name, both from Purdue University.

"El! Mail!" he called down the hallway, and El appeared moments later. Will handed her the envelope, and she tore into it, reading the first line and lighting up with excitement.

"I got in!" she exclaimed.

"Me too," Will smiled less enthusiastically.

"I can't believe it! Can you believe I actually got into college?" El was nearly bouncing up and down. With all that had been going on, she had almost forgotten the college application she had submitted in August.

"Of course I can. You've come a long way the last couple years, and you were really working hard with Mi—" Will stopped and El's face fell. "Uh..."

"It's okay. Mike was helping me a lot. We wanted to be able to go to college together," El shrugged. It was silent for a moment, as Will did not know what to say, until El spoke up. "I wonder if he got his acceptance letter yet."

"He did," Will said. "Last week, he got a few acceptance letters."

"A few?" El asked, furrowing her brow.

"Mike got into Purdue, Ball State, Notre Dame, and some school up in Chicago," Will explained.

"Oh. I didn't know he applied to so many," El said, her face falling. "I guess... it's a good thing we're not together then. So he can go wherever he wants... Good for him, though."

"Some people just apply to multiple schools," Will explained quickly. "Lucas got into Purdue, too. He also got into Notre Dame and Ohio State. And Dustin got accepted to Western Michigan University and—"

"Will, it's fine. Mike and I aren't together anymore. We don't need to go to the same school," El assured him, though Will could tell the smile on her face was forced. He felt a strain in his chest when he saw in her eyes that El was just now realizing they were within the last year of the six of them all being in the same place. Will had been preparing himself for it, and he felt a bit guilty that he hadn't discussed it with El.

"El, it's not like we're going to lose them if they go to a different school than us," Will said gently. "There are holiday breaks and summer vacation."

"I said it's fine," El repeated sternly. "Thanks for the mail." She laid the acceptance letter down on the table and walked back to her bedroom, closing the door.

After school the next day, El was sitting on the bleachers in the high school gym. The basketball team didn't have a game that evening, so they had a two-hour practice. Brad had asked El to watch his practice and go to dinner afterward, and she happily accepted. She didn't know much about basketball, but it was one of the main topics Brad talked about, so after going out with him for a couple weeks, she was picking up on the concept.

Her English homework was spread on the bench next to her; they were nearing the end of their Poe unit as Halloween was approaching. El found that she actually liked several of his works, and she even found the full poem that Brad had recited a bit of on their first date. Today, though, her assignment was sitting untouched, as she was too distracted by the basketball practice going on in front of her. Brad and his teammates had been at it for over an hour and a half, and El could see the sweat glistening on their skin under the gymnasium lights as the ball moved up and down the court.

About twenty minutes later, the coach blew his whistle, and the team gathered around in the center of the gym. El couldn't hear what was being said, but she knew it was finally the end of practice. She started packing her things into her bookbag, and when she looked up next, the coach had dismissed the team. Most of them were headed to the locker room, but Brad was lagging behind with three of his teammates. He kept glancing up at El and even pointed at her a couple times. El shied away and looked over at the wall when Brad's friends turned in the direction he was pointing and looked at her. A moment later, Brad jogged over to El, and his friends joined the rest of the team in the locker room.

"Hey," he greeted her with a peck on the cheek before sitting next to her on the bench. Brad lifted his shirt up to his face to wipe the sweat from his brow, and El snuck a peek at his toned abdomen. When Brad turned his head and caught her looking, he broke out into an amused grin as El turned bright red and started stammering.

"S-sorry I, uh..." she turned away embarrassed.

"Don't be sorry," Brad chuckled and reached out to squeeze her hand. "I just wanted to tell you I'm gonna go grab a shower, and then we can go to dinner. Give me, like, ten minutes."

"Okay," El nodded, still pink from embarrassment, as she turned back to face him. Brad still looked amused, and he offered her a wink before jogging over to the stairs that led down into the locker room.

Fifteen minutes later, Brad emerged from the locker room looking freshly showered, his damp hair combed and styled, and when he got closer, El could smell a mixture of body wash and cologne. He was not approaching her alone; Brad was with one of the guys he had been talking to at the end of practice when he was pointing at her.

"El, this is my buddy Tyler," Brad introduced them when the two guys finally reached her at the end of the bleachers.

"Nice to meet you, El," Tyler smiled, offering his hand for her to shake.

"You as well," El smiled politely, grasping the hand he offered which

encompassed hers like Brad's did when he first introduced himself to her.

"Tyler actually invited us to a party at his house Saturday night after the dance," Brad said.

"Yeah, you should totally come," Tyler added, his toothy grin reaching all the way to his sparkling blue eyes.

"Could I bring my friend Max?" El asked slowly. She didn't want to say no, especially with how well things were going with Brad, but she had apprehensions about big parties after the one she and Max had gone to when they visited Robin and Abby a couple months prior. El was certain there would be alcohol at the party, and she didn't want the only person she knew to be a guy she had only been seeing for a couple weeks.

"Max? Guy or girl?" Tyler asked, scrunching his forehead in confusion at the idea of El asking to bring another guy along in front of Brad.

"Girl," El answered simply, unsure why it mattered.

"The more the merrier," Tyler shrugged, the smile returning to his face. He ran a hand through his thick blonde hair. "The dance is over at 11, but I usually leave around 9 or so. Feel free to come over any time."

"Okay, great," Brad nodded. "Well we have dinner plans, so we're going to head out."

"All right, I'll see you tomorrow," Tyler replied. "Great meeting you, El."

"You too," El smiled as Tyler turned to walk out of the gym.

For dinner, Brad and El went to a local burger joint for burgers and fries. Brad was scarfing his burger down, as he was starving after practice, and he had eaten half of his sandwich before El had taken her third bite.

"Your friend seemed nice," she said as she squirted some ketchup onto her plate for her fries.

"You'll meet more of the guys on Saturday. I think you'll like them," Brad said after swallowing a large bite of his burger.

"I'm sure I will," El smiled. She hoped she would, anyway. She had been starting to feel lonely, and she hoped Brad's group of friends would welcome her in the same way Mike's group of friends had. Hopefully a couple of Brad's friends had girlfriends so she wouldn't be surrounded by a bunch of boys all the time. As much as she loved Dustin, Will, and Lucas, it had been such a breath of fresh air when she had become better friends with Max.

"I meant to ask you," Brad started. "Not that it's a big deal, but why do you want your friend Max to go to the party Saturday night?"

"She's my best friend," El shrugged. "I want someone there that I'm comfortable with."

"Are you not comfortable with me?" Brad asked, furrowing his brow. El thought she saw a flash of anger in his eyes before hurt and confusion appeared.

"No, that's not what I meant," El said quickly. "I just mean, we'll be at your friend's house, and I won't know anyone other than you. I want someone else there that I know so I'll still have someone when you're talking to people I don't know... I would just feel more comfortable having my best friend there."

"Like I said, it's no big deal," Brad repeated. "But don't think I plan on ditching you for my buddies or anything. I plan on spending the whole night with you."

El smiled and blushed a bit, and Brad dropped the subject of Saturday night's party. They spent the rest of the meal talking about his upcoming basketball games next week and what evenings he was free to take her out. After dinner, Brad drove El home, and it was nearly seven o'clock when he pulled up to her house. He gave her a kiss before she told him good night and made her way to the front door.

Once inside, El grabbed the phone from the living room and went to her bedroom to dial Max's number. When Max answered, El told her all about Brad's basketball practice leading up to the reason she

called.

"We were invited to a party after homecoming at his friend Tyler's house," El said excitedly.

"We?" Max repeated.

"Well, Tyler invited Brad and me, but I asked if you could come, and he said yes," El explained. "So, will you come?"

"Of course," Max replied quickly. "I'll see if Lucas wants to come. If not, I'll just third wheel you and Brad."

"Thanks," El sighed in relief. "I want to go and have fun, but I've only ever been drunk once, and I don't want to be around a bunch of people without someone I really trust."

"I totally understand. I'm glad you asked me. I'll definitely be there," Max assured her.

"Great. I just wanted to talk to you about the party. I'll see you at school tomorrow," El said. The girls bid each other good night, and El hung up the phone.

"Do you really think that's a good idea?" El jumped, startled, and turned toward the doorway of her bedroom where Will's voice came from. She frowned, realizing she hadn't closed her door, and Will had heard everything.

"What? Going to a party?" El asked.

"Going to a party at some jock's house where there will be alcohol, and you'll be surrounded by people you don't know," Will said, stepping into her bedroom.

"Well, since you heard all of that, I'm sure you also heard that Max will be there with me," El said snidely.

"I still don't think it's a good idea. You don't know these people, and you haven't even known Brad for very long," Will explained calmly. "If you want to do something after the dance, why don't we all just go to—"

"To where? Mike's house? I'm not exactly welcome there," El spat. "And I'm not exactly part of this 'we all' thing anymore either."

"That's not true. I'm sure Mike can just do something with Lindsey, and the rest of us can go to Lucas's or something," Will suggested.

"Will, have you not been paying attention? I only see you because we live together. You and I barely do anything for fun anymore. I talk to Dustin in study hall, but I haven't seen him outside of school, and Lucas hasn't even spoken to me since Mike and I broke up. The *only* person from our 'party' who still treats me like a friend is Max," El exclaimed, tears starting to well up in her eyes as she yelled the thoughts she had been keeping inside. "No one else talks to me. I don't know what's going on in any of their lives. I didn't even know they got accepted into all these colleges. It's like they're punishing me or something." She watched Will's face as he processed what she said, and she saw the realization that was hitting him.

"El, I'm... sorry. I guess I didn't realize..." Will trailed off. He knew he and El hadn't been spending much time together. He figured she was enjoying her time with Max and with Brad, although he personally disapproved of that.

"It's fine," El shrugged, and Will knew it was not fine. "But this could be a chance for me to make new friends... which is something I'll have to do sooner or later anyway."

"El," Will sighed. He was at a loss. He knew he couldn't hold her back from making her own decisions and spending her time with whoever she wanted, but he still didn't feel right about her going to this party at Brad's friend's house. "Just... be careful, okay?"

"Stop worrying so much," El smiled. "I'll be fine."

The next day after school, Mike, Dustin, Will, and Lucas were all gathered in Mike's basement. Max was at El's house, and Lindsey was babysitting for a family friend. They were hanging out just the four of them, something they hadn't done in a while. A few years ago, Will would have jumped at this chance to play some D&D, but tonight, he had something he wanted to get off his chest after speaking with El the day before.

"Hey guys... so, uh, when's the last time any of you really talked to El?" Will started awkwardly, not sure of how else to bring up the topic. Unsurprisingly, he was met with looks of confusion from Mike and Lucas.

"Well, that would be when she broke my heart and threw away a five-year relationship so she could fuck some guy on the basketball team," Mike answered bitterly. Lucas pointed at Mike and nodded to signify that he also hadn't spoken to El since the breakup.

"I talk to her in our study hall," Dustin replied.

"That's what I thought," Will muttered when his friends confirmed what El had told him last night.

"Why?" Lucas asked.

"Listen," Will sighed. "El and I were talking last night, and she feels... sort of... abandoned by the party."

"She willingly left the party," Mike pointed out.

"No, she willingly broke up with you," Will corrected him as gently as he could. "But she didn't willingly lose the only real friends she's ever known... That's something we did to her." He looked around at Lucas and Dustin's faces, and he saw the guilt start to creep across Dustin's expression.

"I guess you're right," Dustin said. "I even promised her that she was just as much my friend as Mike is... But I never make an effort to see her outside of school."

"None of us really do, other than Max," Will admitted. "I live with her, and I barely see her except for in the mornings before school. We went to the arcade a couple weekends ago, and that was the first time we'd spent quality time together since... before everything happened."

"The way I see it, Mike's the victim here. I'm on his side. If he and El end up back together, I'll welcome her back with open arms, but until then," Lucas patted Mike's shoulder. "I'm sticking with my best friend."

"So you're okay with just turning your back on someone who has been your friend for five years? Someone who has literally saved your life?" Will asked, and Lucas looked down at the floor.

"Well what do you want me to do?" Mike asked, exasperated. "Invite her over? I can't do that. I can't be around her. Plus, Lindsey's here all the time now, and I don't want my ex-girlfriend coming over and parading around my new girl... that I'm seeing."

"Girl that you're seeing?" Dustin repeated. "You still haven't had the boyfriend/girlfriend talk yet?"

"It's complicated," Mike insisted. "And having El around wouldn't make it any less complicated."

"All I'm saying is that El is upset, and she feels like none of us are her friends anymore other than Max," Will said. "I didn't notice it until she brought it up, but honestly, I kind of see her point."

"Fine," Mike sighed. "I don't want you guys to stop being friends with someone because of me, so feel free to hang out with El if you want. Homecoming's tomorrow night. I'll stick with Lindsey and her friends, and you guys can spend time with El and get to know her new... Brad."

"And then we can meet back up here after the dance," Dustin concluded.

"Actually, I agreed to go to some party after the dance," Mike said.

"Party?" Will asked.

"Yeah. Lindsey brought it up a few days ago. I guess she's friends with this girl whose boyfriend always throws a party after school dances," Mike shrugged. "So I'll have to catch up with you guys on Sunday."

"Mike, do you know the guy's name who's throwing this party?" Will asked.

"I think she said his name is Tyler something," Mike replied, waving his hand. "Why?"

"I wonder if that's the same party Max asked me about," Lucas chimed in.

"Um... it is," Will said. Lucas, Mike, and Dustin's heads all turned to face Will.

"Wait, so all three of you know about a party that I wasn't invited to? That's such bullshit!" Dustin exclaimed.

"I wasn't invited either," Will said. "I only know about it because... that Tyler guy is one of Brad's teammates. Tyler invited Brad and El earlier this week, and El invited Max to come along."

"You've got to be shitting me," Mike groaned, leaning back against the couch.

"All right, it's okay," Lucas said, placing his hand back on Mike's shoulder. "I never gave Max a definitive answer. I'll go with her to the party, and I'll just chill with you and Lindsey. Everything will be fine."

"Okay," Mike sighed, nodding. "You're right. There'll be plenty of people there. Everyone will be drinking; I'll be with you and Lindsey, and I won't even have to see El."

"That's the plan," Lucas smiled. Mike returned his friend's smile, took a deep breath, and tried to push away the doubt that was creeping into his mind about Lucas's plan.

**0-0-0**

**A/N: I hope you enjoyed this chapter. The next chapter will have the dance and the afterparty. Also, we will finally have some Mike and El interactions coming up! Thank you again for being patient with me while waiting for this chapter. Please leave me a review to let me know what you're thinking, and I will update soon!**

## 8. Chapter 8

A/N: Hello everyone! I have some important things to share in my notes before and after this chapter! First of all, this chapter realistically could have been broken down into two chapters – the dance and the party. But, I promised you both in this chapter, and I owe it to you after making you wait almost a month for the previous chapter, so buckle up for a long one. This word count before adding my authors notes and shoutouts is 8,555 words, which is the longest fanfiction chapter I've ever written. Next, this chapter contains more adult subject matter. Thus far, I know there has been swearing and sexual references, but up until this chapter, it really could've been rated T. This is the first truly M-rated chapter. You have been warned. If you're still interested, enjoy!

Guest: I'm sorry! I appreciate guest reviews, and I never mean to ignore anyone. My thought process was it could get confusing addressing several people as "guest," so I thanked them as a whole. But I will definitely include you all in my shout outs from now on, because I appreciate you reading just as much as users who review signed in! Thank you for trying to sympathize with El. She's definitely in a rough spot, even though she technically caused it.

Guest: Either the dance... or the party... or both? But definitely not neither.

Guest: Yes, Lucas and the others have known Mike way longer than they've known El. And if (god forbid) Mileven were to break up for real in the show, I see Will and Dustin being more open to maintaining connection with El than Lucas. Just the vibe I get.

Guest: A lot of people are finding it hard to sympathize with El. Maybe that will change as the story progresses. I am so glad you like Lindsey though!

Guest: I don't think it's messed up to want her to realize the consequences of her actions. They're 17, it's part of growing up.

**Niko:** I have my end result planned. Based on my reviews, there are a lot of people who want Mileven to end up together, and there are a lot of people who are shipping Mike/Lindsey. So, either way, some people will be upset haha. Hopefully you can all enjoy the ride until we get there!

**Guest:** Muito obrigado! Fico feliz que você esteja gostando disso e agradeço os elogios.

**Stranger Records:** Yes, there is definitely more to see of Brad. Hopefully you enjoy this chapter.

**Grievesforyou:** Agreed, Mike and Lucas are definitely validated. But, they share mutual friends, and they go to the same school. They've got to come in contact at some point.

**Exploding Helmets:** It'll definitely lay some groundwork for some drama.

**Alisea:** As promised, some Mike and El interaction is straight ahead! I'm glad you like it, and thanks for understanding the long wait for the previous chapter!

**Strangerthingslover13:** Thank you! I'm glad you like it!

**Simon Samovar:** A very interesting observation. We are certainly seeing the worst of some of them. And Mike is pretty sympathetic right now, but his flaws are coming, don't you worry. As requested, I am offering more Lindsey and a bit more insight into El and Brad. I hope you like this chapter!

**JayneFawn:** I'm glad you are enjoying the story, and I would love to know if some of your suspicions come true! Feel free to let me know.

**39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star:** Oh, there will be drama. And yes, some of the boys' actions are understandable, but so is El being hurt by them.

**NoDownSide:** Canon Mileven are definitely soulmates and endgame, and I love them. To be clear, I do not want a Mileven breakup in the show, but I thought writing one would be

interesting. And it has been! But there have been rough patches, and it's definitely okay to find it uncomfortable. Hopefully you like how the story progresses.

**Pirate:** That question will be answered very soon : )

**Phieillydinya:** I sure hope so!

**SophieRock:** Thank you! I'm glad you're enjoying it, and I hope you like this chapter.

**Ada:** You are certainly not alone in feeling that way! We'll have to see how it all plays out.

**Disclaimer:** I do not own Stranger Things or any of its original characters.

**0-0-0**

It was fifteen minutes before Brad had told El to be ready for him to pick her up, and she was just finishing her makeup. Her dress was on, her hair was styled perfectly (thanks to Joyce), and she had spent over an hour applying her makeup so it would look flawless. The finishing step, El smoothed cherry red lipstick over her lips; the shade matched her dress perfectly. She stood and faced the mirror to admire the end result, and she truthfully thought she had never looked better.

"Beautiful," said Joyce's voice from the doorway. El turned and smiled at the beaming woman.

"Thank you," she said. "And just so you know, I won't be home right after the dance. I'll be spending the night at Max's if that's okay."

"Of course," Joyce said. "I can't believe it's yours and Will's senior year... This is the last homecoming dance I'll be sending my kids off to." Joyce was still admiring El through misty eyes. "You've all grown up so fast."

"Is Will still here?" El asked. "I wanted to talk to him before we left."

"No, honey, he left about ten minutes ago. He went to meet up with

Dustin before picking up their dates," Joyce explained. El nodded and looked down.

"Oh, I guess I'll just see him at the dance then," she said. "Brad should be here soon anyway."

"I've been meaning to ask you about Brad," Joyce began. El tensed slightly, wondering if Will had voiced his dislike of Brad to his mother in hopes that Joyce could talk El out of seeing him. "When are you planning on really introducing us? Sure, I've met him briefly when he comes to pick you up, but you've been seeing him now for a couple weeks and I really don't know anything about him."

"Oh," El sighed in relief. It wasn't an ambush. "Um, I don't know. It's not like he's my boyfriend or anything."

"Well, no, but he's someone you've been spending a decent amount of time with, and if he's someone special to you, I want to get to know him," Joyce said.

El frowned. Was Brad someone special to her? He was definitely attractive, El couldn't deny that. She had spent so long resisting his advances and refusing to date him, but he had been so persistent, and once El had found out about Mike and Lindsey, she gave in easily. But she had a good time with Brad. Going out with him wasn't about Mike... Sure, maybe Mike moving on quicker than she had expected was just the nudge she needed to give Brad a chance, but if she didn't like him, she wouldn't have continued going out with him. But still, was he someone special?

"El?" Joyce brought El out of her own thoughts. "Why don't you just tell me a little about him?"

"Okay," El agreed slowly. "He plays basketball, and he's really good at it. I still don't know much about it, but he plays every game, and he always tells me how many points he scored."

"Well maybe if things continue with you two, I can go watch one of his games with you," Joyce offered sweetly. "Jonathan and Will were never into sports, as you know, so it could be fun." El nodded with an appreciative smile.

"What else?" Joyce pressed on.

"He seems really... sensitive," El said. "Like, not in the way that he cries a lot or gets easily offended. But he seems really... hmm... Well, on our first date, before he brought me home, he took me to watch the sunset. And he recited this poem called *Annabel Lee* from memory." Joyce was quick to maintain a supportive smile, but El did not miss the look of skepticism that quickly flashed on her face.

"I know some people might think it sounds cheesy," El said quickly. "But we have English class together, and you know how much I've come to enjoy reading and writing over the years. Brad appreciates literature... I'm not saying that's the only thing about him. But I really like it. It's something different." El looked down and picked at one of her cuticles before continuing.

"Mike was always more into math and science. He could solve any equation, and he liked knowing there was an end result he was looking for. English is more open to interpretation, and Mike got bored of that," El explained. "Don't get me wrong, he was creative and could write things when he had to... Must've been all those D&D years." She and Joyce both chuckled. "But the idea of discussing the meaning behind the written words, Mike just wasn't interested."

"It's definitely good that you and Brad have common interests," Joyce agreed. "And I'm glad to hear he isn't all jock and that he has a sensitive side that he's shown you."

"He has," El assured her. "He's so different from Mike, and Mike is all I've known." Joyce offered an understanding smile, and El felt better after talking with her. It was true, Brad and Mike were like night and day, and El was hoping that there was still more to learn about Brad that would surprise and impress her.

Just then, there was a knock at the front door, and Joyce stood quickly to go answer it. El examined herself once more in the mirror as she heard the front door open and the familiar sound of Brad's voice pleasantly greeting Joyce. She walked down the hallway and turned in to the living room to greet her date.

"Wow," Brad gasped, looking El up and down as she entered the

room. El's pure red dress ended in the middle of her thighs, the skirt flowing around her legs as she walked. It was secured by spaghetti-style straps, and the bodice of the dress was a tighter fit, hugging her curves until it met the skirt at her waist. "You look fantastic."

"Thank you," El blushed. She took in the handsome view in front of her; Brad's hair freshly combed, wearing a fitted black suit and a tie that was the perfect shade of red to match her dress. "You look great, too."

Joyce gushed over how good the two of them looked, and she insisted on taking pictures before hugging El goodbye for the night and wishing the two of them a fun time. El let Brad lead her to his car, and soon they were on their way to the dance, excited for what the night had in store.

Across town, Mike was pulling in to Lindsey's driveway. He turned off the engine of his car and pulled down the visor above the steering wheel to inspect himself in the small mirror. He would likely be meeting Lindsey's parents, and he would be lying if he said he wasn't a bit nervous. After all, Mike had never really been in a meet-the-parents situation before. El didn't have a conventional set of parents, and he had known both Hopper and Joyce before he had met El. Sure, once their relationship had become official, things with Hopper intensified, but Mike still viewed his current situation much differently.

Satisfied that he looked as good as he was going to get, Mike flipped the visor back up into its resting spot on the ceiling of the car, and he walked up to Lindsey's front porch which was illuminated by the porch light, showing they were expecting his arrival. He took a deep breath and rang the doorbell.

"You must be Mike," said the man who opened the door.

Mike hoped his surprise didn't show on his face, as Lindsey's father was not at all how he had been envisioning. The man appeared to be in his mid-forties and was actually about an inch shorter than Mike. He was dressed quite professionally, still in dress pants and a dull tie, and he wore round glasses on his face. Mike had been expecting a gruff bear of a man, and he breathed an internal sigh of relief as he

realized he was not going to be dealing with Hopper 2.0.

"Yes, I'm Mike. It's nice to meet you, Mr. Adkins," Mike smiled and offered his hand to Lindsey's father.

"Please, come in," Mr. Adkins offered after shaking Mike's extended hand. Mike obliged, and he stepped into the foyer as the woman who Mike assumed to be Lindsey's mother scurried around the corner.

"Hello, I'm Lindsey's mother," she smiled warmly, wrapping her arms around Mike in a motherly fashion.

Mrs. Adkins was the same height as her husband, and she had brown eyes which were shining on her smiling face. Lindsey had definitely inherited her brown eyes and auburn hair from her mother, as the woman's hair which was pulled into a bun matched her daughter's hair color perfectly.

"It's nice to meet you," Mike said politely when Lindsey's mother had released him.

"I'll go see how much longer she'll be," Mrs. Adkins offered before turning and hurrying up the stairs. Mr. Adkins gestured toward the living room and invited Mike to come inside and have a seat, which Mike did.

"So, Mike, my daughter seems to enjoy spending time with you," the man began. "Why don't you tell me a bit about yourself." Mike nodded and clasped his hands together on his lap, unsure of where to begin. He had been hoping Lindsey would be ready to go so that they could have left directly after the introductions and avoided the small talk.

"Well, I'm in AP chemistry with Lindsey, which is how we met. We were assigned to be lab partners," Mike explained.

"She did mention you were rather intelligent," Mr. Adkins nodded. "She said you both got in to college in Chicago?"

"Yes, we did... But, not, like, together or anything," Mike added quickly. He didn't want Lindsey's father thinking he was trying to sweep his daughter away to Chicago after going out with her for a

couple of weeks. "We both happened to apply, and we were both accepted."

"Were you accepted anywhere else?" Mr. Adkins asked, seemingly unphased by Mike's awkwardness.

"Yes, I'm considering a few... Ball State, Notre Dame... Purdue," Mike replied.

"Some good options," Mr. Adkins nodded thoughtfully. "I'm sure you'll make the right choice."

As Lindsey's father was opening his mouth, about to question Mike about his hobbies and interests, the two men heard footsteps behind them. They both stood and turned toward the entrance of the living room, and Lindsey's mother scurried in, grinning from ear to ear, Lindsey following behind her. Mike hoped his eyes didn't bulge in his head too noticeably when he saw his date.

Lindsey was wearing a blue pleated party dress. It was lowcut but tasteful, accentuating her form, and it fell to just above her knees. Her auburn hair was curled and draped over her shoulders, and she wore silver high heels to complete the look. She approached Mike, smiling up at him.

"Hi," Mike breathed in awe.

"Hi," Lindsey returned.

"You look... really pretty," Mike marveled, and Lindsey blushed.

"You clean up pretty well yourself," she said lightly.

Mike and Lindsey let Mrs. Adkins take photo after photo of them until Lindsey finally groaned that enough was enough. Mike shook each of her parents' hands, and Lindsey gave them each a hug and kiss goodbye, and soon Mike and Lindsey were out the door.

"Are you ready?" Lindsey asked from the passenger seat as Mike backed out of her driveway.

"For a homecoming dance?" Mike asked, scrunching his brow.

"Not just the dance," Lindsey laughed. "Although it is our first public event together... But I meant are you ready to meet my friends?"

"Oh, yeah, of course!" Mike replied, reaching over to take Lindsey's hand. "You've been really cool about spending so much time with my friends – and they love you, by the way – so it's only fair that we spend some time with yours."

"I'm sure you'll all get along great," Lindsey assured him. Mike squeezed her hand and drove on, silently hoping for the night to go smoothly.

Hawkins High School had a small dance committee which was comprised of twelve girls, three from each grade. Each year, the committee opts to save the majority of their budget for prom, so homecoming never has an actual theme. It is generally decorated with streamers from the ceiling and balloons. There was an arch made of balloons at the entrance to the gymnasium which all arriving students walked through, and the DJ was set up on the opposite wall with a blue curtain surrounding his station. There was also a photographer set up near the balloon arch to take photos of the arriving couples in front of blue and white decorative curtains.

Brad and El walked into the gym, through the balloon arch, and paused momentarily for the photographer to take their picture. Almost immediately afterward, Brad saw a group of his teammates across the gym, and he raised his arm to wave at them. He grabbed El's hand and pulled her across the floor to greet his friends.

His teammates were all wearing black suits and colored ties. Some of them stood with their arms around girls, presumably their dates, and others appeared to be attending solo. Brad pointed around the group, telling El each person's name, though it was too many to remember. El smiled politely at each person, and soon Brad was engulfed in conversation that El was not part of. The girls who had accompanied Brad's teammates appeared to be friends, as they were having their own conversation which El was also not part of. She shifted her weight and bit her tongue; Brad had assured her that he wouldn't ignore her for his buddies.

'We just got here,' she thought to herself, assuring herself that he

would turn his attention to her after chatting with his teammates.

El glanced around the gym to see who was there. The music the DJ was playing was filling the room, so Brad and his teammates had gotten louder, though El was still not listening to their conversation. She finally spotted her best friend across the room, standing with Will and the girl El assumed to be Will's date. She placed her hand on Brad's elbow and stood on her toes to say in his ear that she was going to go say hi to Max. He nodded, and El took off toward her best friend.

"El! You look so gorgeous!" Max exclaimed when El approached her.

"So do you!" El returned the compliment, wrapping Max in a tight hug. Max was wearing a black dress, heavy on the sparkle.

"Hi El," Will said over the music. He gestured to the girl to his side. "This is my date, Jessica." El smiled politely and greeted the girl Will had introduced.

"Where are Lucas and Dustin?" El asked, turning back to Max.

"Lucas went to grab us some punch, and I honestly don't know where Dustin and his date ran off to," Max replied. Almost as if on cue, Dustin appeared next to Will, holding the hand of a girl in a purple dress that El had never met.

"Hey guy- EL!" Dustin interrupted his greeting when he saw El standing with Max and Will. "When did you get here?!" He pulled El into a tight hug, and she couldn't help but notice a strong smell on his breath and the fact that he was swaying slightly.

"Hi Dustin," El smiled, pulling back from the boy but keeping a hand on his back to offer support to steady himself. "I just got here a little bit ago. Are you okay?"

"Am I okay? I'm grrrrrrreat!" Dustin mimicked Tony the Tiger, and El shot Max a concerned look.

"Are you drunk?" Max asked accusingly. El and Will's eyes darted over to Dustin who pursed his lips at the accusation.

"Maybe I am," he slurred. "Thanks to Tina, here," Dustin lifted the hand of the girl he was with, "We just met up with her friends behind the gym for some shots... And since you assholes didn't invite me to your party, I didn't invite you to mine."

"It's not our party," Max asserted. "And do you know how much trouble you'll get in if you're caught drinking on school property?" Dustin rolled his eyes and waved his hand to brush Max's concern away.

"Trouble, shmubble," Dustin mumbled. His eyes widened, and the others turned to see what Dustin was looking at as he loudly greeted their approaching friend. "LUCAS!"

"Hey, buddy, you all right?" Lucas asked, holding the two cups of punch out to the side in an attempt not to spill them as Dustin threw his arms around him.

"He's grrrrreat," Max said mockingly, and Lucas gave her a questioning look.

"He was off taking shots behind the gym," Will explained, and Lucas gave an understanding nod.

"How many did you take?" Lucas asked, handing a cup of punch to Max. "And what was it?"

"Some kind of tequila," Dustin slurred. "And who's counting?"

"Might as well have just drank straight from the bottle," Max muttered.

"Ayyyyyy," Dustin hollered, pointing at Max as if that was the best idea he had ever heard.

"Don't get any ideas," Max scolded. When Dustin and his date started talking to Will and his date, Max turned her attention back to El.

"I would really rather not spend this evening babysitting this goon," Max said, gesturing at Dustin. El chuckled and glanced up at Lucas who was taking a sip of his punch and avoiding looking her direction.

"Hi Lucas," she offered.

"El," Lucas nodded, still avoiding eye contact and taking another sip. El felt the sting of rejection, but she maintained her smile and turned back to Max who offered her an apologetic nod.

"So anyway, I want to apologize," Dustin said loudly, draping an arm around El's shoulders. She staggered a bit under his weight. "I promised you were just as much my friend as Mike, and I haven't been proving that." El smiled awkwardly and patted Dustin's back, having hoped her and Mike would not be a topic of discussion.

"I'm gonna get better about that," Dustin slurred. "We all are... Right, Lucas?" El snuck a glance over at Lucas and saw him roll his eyes before lifting his cup to his lips once again.

"It's okay, Dustin," El assured him. "But thank you. I really appreciate that."

"Of course," Dustin said, pushing himself off of El and saluting her before turning back to his date. El chuckled and shook her head. She turned her head and a flash of blue happened to catch her eye. El looked at the balloon arch near the door to the gym, and her stomach dropped.

Mike walked through the door into the gymnasium with Lindsey on his arm. She was laughing at something he said as they stepped under the balloon arch. They stepped over for the photographer to take their picture, Mike slinking his arm around Lindsey's waist and resting his hand on the small of her back.

After the photo, they stepped further into the dance, and Mike gazed around the gym. Music was playing loudly, and the room was beginning to get crowded. He soon felt eyes burning into him, and his gaze was drawn further to his right. When he locked eyes with El, he was sure he felt his heart skip a beat as all the air left his lungs. He stood for a moment, frozen, holding his ex-girlfriend's gaze, taking in the way her dress clung to her in all the right places. Maybe it was because this was the first time he had seen her outside of the occasional pass in the hallway at school, but El just looked so...

"...beautiful," Mike muttered under his breath.

"Huh? Did you say something?" Lindsey asked, looking up at him and sliding her arm around his waist. Mike was jerked out of his thoughts and looked quickly down at his date.

"Uh, beautiful. I was just saying you look beautiful tonight," he recovered. Lindsey smiled sweetly and leaned up to kiss Mike on the cheek.

Mike shifted his eyes back toward El and saw her talking to Max, not looking his way at all. He let out a sigh and wondered where El's date was. Just then, Mike watched as Brad appeared out of nowhere, draping an arm around El's shoulders with a loud "there you are" which Mike heard over the music.

"Come on, I want you to meet some of my friends," Lindsey said, taking Mike's hand and pulling him in the opposite direction.

Mike met three of Lindsey's closest friends. All three girls also introduced Mike and Lindsey to their dates, and they stood chatting for a while. Mike kept sneaking glances around the gym, locating his usual friend group and noticing how much Dustin was stumbling. Mike wondered if he had gotten into some alcohol before the dance. His eyes always found El, too. Sometimes she was talking to Max, sometimes she was with a group of jocks, but Brad was always with her.

Of course Brad was with her. They were dating, Mike assumed. And El looked happy. Mike knew he was here to have a good time with Lindsey, and Lindsey deserved his full attention. He really did like Lindsey, and she had been so helpful in getting him through his breakup with El. Mike watched as Brad's hand rubbed up and down El's back, lingering a bit longer than Mike would have appreciated, and he tore his eyes away from her, determined to focus on the stunning girl he had come here with.

"Do you want to dance?" Mike asked abruptly, taking Lindsey's hand. "We are at a dance, after all."

"Yeah! Of course," Lindsey smiled and walked hand-in-hand with

Mike out to the dance floor.

The DJ had just announced he was going to "slow things down," and softer music filled the gym. Mike placed his hands on Lindsey's waist, and she wrapped her arms around his neck as the two of them began to sway to the beat of the music. Mike was staring into Lindsey's eyes when he saw El out of the corner of his eye. He told himself over and over not to look over at her, to just keep focusing on his date. As he and Lindsey rotated, El came in to his clear line of vision, and his eyes involuntarily darted over Lindsey's shoulder to observe El dancing closely with Brad. Lindsey noticed a small frown cross Mike's face, and she glanced over her shoulder to follow his stare.

"She looks really pretty tonight," Lindsey said softly, turning back to Mike, but not meeting his eyes. Mike felt like a ton of bricks had just hit him in the stomach.

"God, I am so sorry, Lindsey. I'm acting like such a douche right now," he groaned.

"I get it," Lindsey shrugged sympathetically. "You were together for such a long time. I can't expect you to be over her in less than two months."

"But I *want* to be over her. And I am *getting* over her," Mike said quickly. "You're helping with that a lot." He lifted Lindsey's chin gently with his finger.

"Well, here, let me help even more," she smiled and pulled Mike down to meet her lips as she kissed him deeply. Mike pulled her closer to himself and clasped his fingers together over the small of her back, holding her body against his.

"You really are amazing. You're so understanding with this El situation," Mike said when Lindsey had pulled back from the kiss. He rested his forehead against hers.

"You can't help how you feel. And it seems like you've been really honest with me about everything, so I know you don't want to hurt me," Lindsey explained. "I just want to help you however I can."

Mike leaned in to kiss her again, and after a moment, he felt her tongue slide through his open lips.

"If you keep helping like that, I'll be totally over her in no time," Mike joked. Lindsey chuckled and rested her head against his chest while Mike held her tightly against himself. They swayed silently to the music, just holding each other, for several minutes.

"For the rest of the night, I'm going to be the date you deserve," Mike softly broke the silence. "I'm not going to worry about what my ex is doing. I'm all yours."

Lindsey's eyes lit up at what Mike promised her, and she squeezed him tightly. The rest of the night, he kept his word. He and Lindsey danced to song after song, stopping for punch when they got thirsty. El did not cross Mike's mind again, and he did not seek her out on the dance floor. Maybe it was because of how supportive and understanding Lindsey was being about everything. He felt like he didn't have to hide anything from her; she just made everything so comfortable. Mike felt his heart swell at how lucky he was to have her, but he couldn't help thinking he didn't deserve her. She was almost too good to be true.

After the dance had ended, Mike and Lindsey got into his car and started driving to the party. Lucas and Max were following them in Lucas's car. Mike wasn't too excited by the idea of Max being there, but he knew he wanted Lucas around, and Lucas wouldn't have been invited if it weren't for Max in the first place. The thought that El would be there crossed Mike's mind, and he quickly pushed it out. He had done so well during the second half of the dance, not thinking of or looking for El, and only focusing on Lindsey. Surely, he could do the same at this party.

Mike pulled up to a sprawling two-story house and shut off his car. As he, Lindsey, Lucas, and Max walked up the driveway, the bass from the music playing inside caused the whole foundation of the house to vibrate. They pushed the front door open and were instantly greeted with the vision of teenagers packed into the house, dancing on each other while the music rattled the walls, and holding cups and bottles of beer and liquor. Max couldn't help but notice the similarities to the party she and El attended a couple months prior.

"He throws one of these after every dance?" Mike asked loudly, close to Lindsey's ear.

"His mom passed away a long time ago, and his dad is out of town traveling for work almost every other weekend," she explained. Mike nodded, accepting the answer.

Max pushed past Mike and Lindsey, having told Lucas she was going to go find El. El had stopped and told Max that she and Brad were leaving the dance about a half hour before it ended, and Max had offered to leave then too, but El told her it wasn't necessary. Max knew El wanted her there for her own comfort, so Max wanted to find her and make sure she was still doing okay. After Max took off to find El, Lucas leaned in to Mike's ear to tell him he would go find some drinks, and he was suddenly off to the kitchen.

One of Lindsey's friends who Mike had met at homecoming came up to them with her date, noticeably drunk, and each of them carrying two shots. She and her date handed a shot glass to each Mike and Lindsey, and the four of them downed the liquor.

When Lucas returned, he was carrying two bottles of beer for himself and Mike and a cup of whatever concoction was being served in the punchbowl in the kitchen for Lindsey. She happily took the cup and downed half of the drink in one gulp, earning a shocked but impressed look from Mike.

The three of them hung out, drinking their drinks and doing their best to talk over the loud music that was playing. They mingled with people who stopped by to chat, and they took a couple more shots that were offered by some of Lindsey's friends. By the time Lucas came back from the kitchen with their third round of drinks, Mike had a good buzz going, and he could tell Lindsey was feeling the effects of the alcohol as well.

"Let's go sit down," Lucas hollered, pointing at a spot on the couch that had just been vacated. They hurried over, and Mike sat down on the empty cushion, Lindsey sliding onto his lap, and Lucas situated himself on the arm of the couch.

"Are you having a good time?" Mike asked into Lindsey's ear,

nuzzling against her neck.

"I'm having a blast!" Lindsey exclaimed, tipping her cup back to drink every last drop. Mike took the empty cup from her and set it on the coffee table in front of them.

"Why don't you take a break for a bit?" he suggested, watching as Lindsey swayed in his lap. She had her arm around his shoulders, and she nodded in agreeance.

"I wonder where Max is," Lucas pondered, glancing around the house. Mike casually looked around, not seeing his friend's girlfriend, and found himself nonchalantly rubbing Lindsey's thigh while she rested her head on his shoulder.

"Do you feel okay?" Mike asked her gently.

"Mhm... I haven't had that much to drink," Lindsey answered dreamily, playing with a strand of Mike's hair.

"I know... but you drank it all in a really short amount of time," Mike pointed out.

"Psh," Lindsey waved her hand. She went back to playing with his hair until making a request a few minutes later. "Mike, can you go get me some water?"

"Of course," Mike said, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear and kissing her temple. Mike shifted Lindsey's legs off of him so that she was sitting on the couch and he could stand up. He told Lucas he was going to the kitchen to grab water, and he took off down the hall.

In the center of the kitchen, there was an island countertop where the punchbowl was placed with stacks of plastic cups next to it. Mike squeezed by some of his drunk classmates and grabbed one of the cups. He turned around to use the sink, and when he turned back, he stopped in his tracks as he saw the one person he had been hoping not to see.

"Mike," El said quietly.

She was standing three feet away from him, and he couldn't hear her soft voice over the music, but he read his name on her lips. He didn't say anything back, and El took a step closer to him, her mouth moving with more words that Mike couldn't hear.

"I can't hear you," he said, gesturing toward his ear and then their surroundings, hoping she would understand. It seemed that she did, because she looked at the patio door to her left and then back at Mike with a questioning look in her eye. She tilted her head toward the door and took a couple steps toward it, waiting to see if Mike would follow her. He did.

"This is better," El said, referring to the muffled music when they stepped onto the patio and closed the door.

"Yeah," Mike agreed. He was watching the water swirling around in the cup he was holding, not looking up at El, but he could feel her watching him.

"So... how have you, uh, been?" El asked awkwardly.

She wished he would look up at her. She knew that she had hurt him when she broke up with him... and then again when she checked out Brad in front of him in the cafeteria... and then again when she set a date with Brad in front of him in the hallway at school. She knew Mike had every reason to avoid her, but she still needed to know he didn't hate her.

"I've been okay," Mike answered and then paused. "You?"

"Good... I've been good," she replied.

There was more awkward silence. Mike was beginning to think following her out here was a mistake. What did they even have to talk about anymore? Nothing. He was about to walk back inside, which El must have noticed.

"How's Lindsey?" she blurted out. Mike finally looked her in the face, wearing a surprised expression.

"She's, uh, good. Yeah... things are going good. She's really sweet, and... it's good," Mike said uncomfortably. "How's playing the field?"

He swore he saw a flash of pain in her eyes, but she quickly recovered.

"Not exactly how I envisioned it," El admitted quietly. Mike nodded. Part of him wanted to ask what she meant, how had she envisioned it, how were things really going with Brad. But he said none of that. He was here with a kind, lovely person who he really liked, and he wasn't going to get involved in drama with his ex-girlfriend.

"Well, I'm sure it'll get better... You probably have tons of... options," Mike said, hiding his bitterness the best he could.

"Mike, I know you're going to believe whatever you're going to believe, but I just want you to know that there was *nothing* between me and Brad or anybody else when you and I were together," El said quickly. Mike could tell she had been holding that in and was dying to tell him. "I know that doesn't change what I did to you, but I just had to tell you."

Mike looked down at the ground. Was she telling the truth? Had things really not started with Brad until after she broke up with him? Even so, it was almost immediately after. And it didn't matter. El was with Brad, Mike was with Lindsey.

"Maybe s-someday... we can be... friends again?" El asked timidly.

Mike almost felt his heart break in his chest again. Friends with El? Friends with the girl he fell in love with at twelve years old and loved with everything in him for five years? The girl he would've literally died for? To be just friends with her... But what really broke Mike's heart was the insecurity in El's voice. She really thought he hated her. And maybe he had reason to... But he never could. He looked back up at her, and she was staring at the ground. Mike didn't know if it was the alcohol, but there were almost no words to describe how she looked. Beautiful, perfect, angelic... He had to pick one. Meet her halfway; take hold of the olive branch she was trying to extend.

"El," Mike said suddenly, and she looked up at him with hope filling her eyes. "You look really-"

"There you are," Brad said, appearing next to El and slinking his arm

around her shoulders, pulling her into his side. "I was wondering why it was taking you so long to get a couple drinks." He eyed Mike suspiciously, and Mike took a sip of the water he was holding and turned away, pretending to look for someone while still listening to Brad and El.

"There were a lot of people ahead of me refilling, and I wanted to get some air," El lied.

Out of the corner of his eye, Mike watched as Brad dipped his head toward El's shoulder and whispered something in her ear. Brad took her by the hand, and Mike turned to watch as El was pulled back inside and down the hallway toward the master bedroom. Before entering the room, El looked back and met Mike's eyes one last time, and Mike thought he saw something apologetic in her gaze.

Mike sighed and walked back inside the kitchen. He saw Lindsey standing in the doorway of the kitchen leading to the hallway to the living room, but he didn't know she had seen him outside talking to El, or that she had seen him watch El disappear down the hallway with Brad. And Mike certainly didn't know that Lindsey, with a bit of additional confidence from the alcohol, had made it her goal to make Mike forget all about El even being at this party.

Lindsey strode up to him and wrapped her arms around Mike's neck. He went to look down at her, but he was instantly met with her lips on his. Mike's eyes widened in surprise briefly before returning the kiss. Lindsey's mouth tasted strongly of liquor, and Mike could tell by the way she was tugging at his hair and pulling his head into her that she was still tipsy. She pulled back from the kiss, and Mike looked down into her blown pupils as she stared up at him, biting her bottom lip.

"Let's go upstairs. It's too loud down here," Lindsey purred into his ear.

Mike felt goosebumps spread down his body at the sense of Lindsey's breath on his ear and neck, but he allowed her to take his hand and lead him toward the staircase, only briefly glancing back at the closed door that he had watched El walk through with Brad moments ago.

Upstairs, Lindsey led him straight to an empty guest room, and she closed and locked the door behind them. Her lips were attacking his again, and she pushed his suit jacket down his arms until it fell to the floor. Lindsey wrapped her arms around Mike's waist and started walking him backward until he felt the backs of his legs collide with the bed. She pressed her body against his until he fell backward and she landed on top of him, never breaking the kiss.

Mike's head was spinning. He knew he wasn't that drunk, but just how drunk was Lindsey? He felt Lindsey's lips traveling from his mouth down his jaw and to the side of his neck. Mike tried to ignore the warmth rushing through his body. Everything she was doing felt so good... gliding her tongue over his skin, sucking and nibbling along his neck... He had to ground himself before it was too late.

He turned his head and tried focusing on his surroundings. The room was so bland; there was hardly any decoration other than the set of three paintings above the dresser. Mike turned his head back and just stared up at the ceiling, trying to steady his breathing. He lifted his hands to Lindsey's shoulders and was about to push her back a bit before-

"Uhn... fuck," he breathed as Lindsey released the suction she had on his neck with a pop. She flicked his earlobe with her tongue and giggled, her hot breath sending another warm wave over Mike's body. He closed his eyes for a moment, about to give in to the girl on top of him. He could easily let loose, stop resisting and let his instincts take control...

"Lindsey," Mike said clearly, his eyes shooting open as he pushed up lightly against her shoulders. Lindsey trailed her kisses back to Mike's lips.

"Linds... hey... stop," Mike's muffled voice said between kisses. He turned his head away from her. "Lindsey, stop for a minute." And she did. Mike turned back to look at her, her droopy eyes filled with disappointment and hurt as she hovered over him.

"What? Do you not like it?" she asked.

"Oh, I do! Believe me, I do," Mike said quickly. "But you're drunk,

and-"

"I'm not drunk," Lindsey protested, opening her droopy eyes as wide as she could. "I'm a little tipsy... but I know exactly what I'm doing, and I know exactly what I want." She leaned down again and planted a couple kisses on his neck while she pulled at his tie to loosen it.

"I just... oh shit... I, uh, just don't want you to do anything you'll regret," Mike said as Lindsey began rubbing his chest as she pulled at his tie.

"Why would I regret this?" she asked, moving to the other side of Mike's neck and nibbling his other earlobe.

"I know you haven't... been with anyone in a long time and... you're drunk – tipsy... I just don't want to be taking advantage of you," Mike said sincerely. Lindsey stopped what she was doing and brought her face directly over Mike's so her eyes could meet his before he continued. "I told you, I really like you. I don't want you to get hurt."

"You would never take advantage of me," Lindsey said softly. "You've been nothing but sweet to me. And I'm doing this – or, I'm *trying* to do this – because I want to... Now, if you want me to stop, I'll stop... But I really want to make you feel good... Don't you want me to make you feel good?" She had moved her fingers slowly down Mike's body until she reached his pants, and Lindsey pulled at his shirt until it was completely untucked. Then, she waited patiently for his response.

Of course Mike wanted it. He hadn't been touched like this in so long. And Lindsey seemed sure that she wanted it too. He had been as clear with her as he could be, and she insisted this was what she wanted.

El flashed in his mind. The way she had taken his breath away at the dance. The interaction they had just had on the patio.

But she was downstairs... in another bedroom... with Brad. They may have reached an unspoken understanding that they could be civil, but they still weren't together. They were both with other people.

And right now, the girl Mike was with was on top of him, practically

begging to *make him feel good*, and just waiting for his answer.

"Yes... please," Mike said quietly against Lindsey's lips.

She smiled and kissed him while her hands went to work on his belt. Mike hungrily kissed her, his hand tangling in her hair as he held her mouth firmly against his while their tongues meshed together. He moaned into Lindsey's mouth when he felt her unzip his pants, and his hardening member was granted some relief.

Lindsey pulled his pants and underwear down his legs, and Mike's cock was exposed to her for the first time. She readily wrapped her fingers around it and began pumping slowly. Mike closed his eyes and hissed in ecstasy at the feeling of her hand wrapped just right around him. He felt her rub her thumb over the tip, spreading a bit of pre-cum down his shaft so her hand could glide easier up and down.

"Does that feel good?" Mike opened his eyes and looked down to meet Lindsey's gaze at the sound of her voice.

"S-so good," he whispered.

Lindsey smiled mischievously and licked her lips. Mike watched as she lowered her mouth to the base of his penis and traced her tongue along the underside all the way up to his tip. He groaned as Lindsey started gliding her tongue along each side of his cock, treating it like a lollipop. Mike's eyes nearly closed again, until he felt her lips expand slowly over the tip of his penis, encompassing the first inch in her mouth while her tongue swirled around the head.

Mike reached down for Lindsey's hand that was resting on his thigh, and he intertwined their fingers, squeezing as she began to lower herself, taking him fully into her mouth an inch at a time. Lindsey's mouth came to a stop when she had engulfed Mike's entire length, and she started to slowly bob her head up and down his shaft while using her free hand to gently massage his balls.

A moan escaped Mike's throat, and he placed his hand on the back of Lindsey's head, grasping a handful of her hair while she picked up the pace. He looked down to watch her, and her dark eyes met his while her lips maintained the perfect amount of suction on his cock. She

moved her lips all the way up until he was removed from her mouth, and her hand began vigorously jerking him, mixing her saliva with his pre-cum.

"You're fucking incredible," Mike groaned.

Lindsey grinned before leading her mouth back to his throbbing erection, taking the whole length in much quicker this time. She felt Mike's tip hit the back of her throat and heard him yelp as he tightened his fist around the handful of her hair. Lindsey sucked harder, bobbing her head up and down his shaft, and she felt his hand on the back of her head begin to guide her speed and movement.

"Oh God..." Mike breathed. "Don't stop Linds... ugh fuck."

Mike felt Lindsey transfer the control over to him as he pushed and pulled on the back of her head and started thrusting his hips to match the motions. He heard her muffled groan, the vibrations causing his dick to twitch.

Mike knew he was close. It had been so long since he'd felt like this.

Lindsey grasped Mike's hips, her fingers digging into his skin as he thrusted into her mouth. A gurgling sound filled her throat, sending vibrations around Mike's cock once again, and he grunted loudly.

"Shit... I'm gonna cum," Mike moaned, his hands still on the back of Lindsey's head. "Ooh I'm gonna cum... fuck... fuck I'm cummi-ahhh."

Mike released his hold on Lindsey's head as the first string of cum hit the back of her throat. She quickly removed her mouth and replaced it with her hand, pumping him until his entire eruption of white, hot cum had coated her hand and his pelvis. Mike began to relax beneath her, and Lindsey gently released his penis when she felt the tension in his body subside.

There was a box of tissues on the nightstand, and Lindsey grabbed a couple to wipe her hand with. Her skin still felt sticky, but it would do the job until she could reach a sink. She set the box of tissues next to Mike on the bed so he could clean himself, and then she crawled

up and laid next to him, propping herself up on one elbow and grinning at him, appearing pleased with herself.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" Lindsey smirked.

"That's putting it lightly," Mike chuckled, not totally believing it had really just happened. Lindsey grinned and cupped the side of Mike's face in one hand, turning him to face her and planting a kiss on his lips.

"Clean yourself up. We should get back downstairs," she said. Mike felt a bit selfish, knowing Lindsey hadn't gotten any relief from what they had just done.

"Are you sure? I could... um... if you wanted, I mean," Mike raised his eyebrows suggestively, and Lindsey smiled before kissing him again.

"This was to make *you* feel good. You'll have plenty of time to pay me back later," she said with a wink.

"Well I definitely owe you one after that," Mike said, reaching for the box of tissues.

While Mike cleaned himself and put his clothes back on, Lindsey stepped out of the room and into the hall bathroom to tidy herself up. She wet some toilet paper and wiped the smeared mascara from under her eyes and the lipstick from around her mouth. When she felt she looked presentable enough, she exited the bathroom and rejoined Mike so they could go back downstairs to the party.

When Mike and Lindsey reached the bottom of the stairs, Mike instantly found Max and Lucas leaning against a wall in the living room, talking to none other than El. Well, Max was talking to El, at least. Lucas was leaning his head against the wall, looking like he was focusing very hard on not falling asleep standing up. When Mike saw El, his mind flooded with questions. What happened in that bedroom? Where is Brad? Did she see him and Lindsey coming down from upstairs?

The latter was answered when El turned her head and locked eyes

with Mike. She quickly noticed Lindsey's makeup looked different. Mike averted El's gaze, but not before she saw something faint in his expression... Was that guilt?

"We're gonna head out," Mike said, mainly to Lucas, when he and Lindsey reached them.

"You okay to drive?" Lucas asked.

"Yeah," Mike nodded. He had sobered up from the drinks he had earlier in the night. He and Lindsey told Lucas and Max good night, and Mike offered El a small nod and smile, before they turned and walked out the front door.

On their way down the driveway, Lindsey stopped suddenly, realizing she had forgotten her clutch.

"I think I left it on the couch," she said. "I'll be right back!" She hurried back toward the front door.

Mike slowly walked over to his car and leaned against the hood, waiting for his date to come back out. To his right, he saw someone approaching and smelled the distinct smell of smoke.

"Hey Wheeler," Brad said, stepping in front of Mike and breathing a cloud of smoke off to the side. "Enjoying my sloppy seconds?"

"You're disgusting," Mike glared.

"Your ex-girlfriend doesn't seem to think so," Brad smirked.

"She's going to see through you. She's not stupid," Mike insisted, and Brad chuckled.

"Who says there's anything to see through? I could really like El," he said, holding up his hands in fake surrender.

"I know how you treated Lindsey a couple years ago," Mike said. "Once you get what you want from El, you're going to toss her to the side and go after your next conquest with your nice guy act."

"You should really keep the storytelling to your stupid dragon game,"

Brad sneered, tossing his cigarette on the ground and stepping on it. "And you should stay away from El, for your own good. I don't want to see you talking to her, making eyes at her from across the room, none of that. You had your shot with her, and now you need to back off."

"What's going on?" Lindsey's voice caused both Mike and Brad to snap their heads in her direction. She stood at the end of the driveway holding the clutch she had gone back in to retrieve.

"Nothing," Brad smirked, and Lindsey noticed how he eyed her up and down. "You two have a good night."

Brad walked back up the driveway to go back inside the party, while Mike and Lindsey got into Mike's car. Lindsey asked again what Brad had been saying to him, and Mike told her not to worry about it. He dropped Lindsey off at home, walking her to the front door and sharing a good night kiss, and then he took the long way around town to get to his house. Mike could feel that things were not going to end well between Brad and El, and as much as he tried to push that from his mind and pretend he didn't care if El got hurt, he knew that wasn't the case. He just hoped that whatever happened, someone would be there for her. Especially since that person could no longer be him.

**0-0-0**

A/N: A few things. I've had a handful of reviewers (through PM's and reviews) ask me to try my hand at some smut, so I thought I would dip my toe in the water a bit. For those who like smut, I hope I did all right. For those who don't like it, fear not, it is not going to become a major part of the story. I can only think of one more point in the plot coming up where smut will be involved, and it won't be for several chapters yet. Also, people have been concerned on whether Mike and/or Eleven still have feelings for each other. In this chapter, we got to see both of them deal with a bit of jealousy, and we got to see Mike struggling with really liking another girl (Lindsey) while not being over his ex. With Lindsey, she has been understanding and patient this whole story, and we will be seeing how long that will continue to last. Anyway, I know I threw a lot at you with

this chapter, and while nothing is perfect, I am proud of this installment overall. I hope it's enough to tie you over, because it may be a week or two before I am able to write chapter 9. The holidays are coming up, and I am busier than I thought I would be. Please leave me a review, and I will update when I can : )

## 9. Chapter 9

A/N: Welcome back! To those of you who celebrated it on Thursday, I hope you had a Happy (American) Thanksgiving! This chapter, we won't be going super far back in time, but we will see some of the missed moments from the afterparty through El's eyes before we pick back up with the story. I hope you enjoy!

Strangerthingslover13: No worries about not reviewing! I appreciate you reading the story whenever you can. I'm glad you like the previous chapter, and I hope you enjoy this one!

Guest: That will certainly be addressed.

Guest: I know. One of my least favorite things is when people ask their exes if they can be friends.

Abby: Hmm. A Lindsey/El confrontation would certainly be interesting, wouldn't it? I'm glad you liked the chapter!

Alisea: Thank you so much! I like your theories about Brad and Lindsey. Let me know if you are right about them!

Guest: Yes, that is coming up this chapter.

Guest: An interesting thought!

39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star: If you don't like Brad, that won't get any better with this chapter!

Lewis2142: I don't like Mike or El hurting either! We'll have to see what comes of the Brad situation.

HarleyGrove: I agree. But after so many years, how could they not still have feelings for each other? I'm glad you liked the chapter.

JayneFawn: You're reading Brad very well. And an interesting take on El's motivation to keep things going with Brad. Oftentimes people don't see what they don't want to see, or

they'll make excuses for it.

**Niko:** I feel like it would be too out of Mike's character for him to not still care for El. I think he will always care for El, no matter what she does or what happens between them. In the show and in general.

**NoDownSide:** Thank you, I appreciate that. There is much more to develop around what is going on with El, Mike, Max, and the others as well.

**SophieRock:** Thank you! I am glad you liked it. You'll get to see what happened with El.

**Simon Samovar:** I hope you are enjoying the drama, because there will be a lot more of it. And thank you, I'm glad you found Mike and El's interaction authentic.

**Stranger Records:** Yeah, it's hard when Mileven isn't together. In between chapters for this story, I have some Mileven material that I work on, so writing these chapters for this story with them broken up isn't quite as depressing.

**Guest:** I love reading everyone's opinions on the characters in this story! Don't worry, the M-rating will come in to play again in the future. I hope you enjoy the drama that will be unfolding!

**Pirate:** Thank you. And I know I created her, but I also really like Lindsey in this story. And Mike is a good guy who, I agree, is trying to do the right thing. I hope you like this chapter.

**Phieillydinya:** I'm glad you liked it! Brad and El content coming up!

**Guest:** Thank you, I'm glad you liked it. It was my first time trying my hand at smut, but I've been asked to write it, and I've been kicking around the idea of some one-shots or a small smutty story with a not-too-complex plot. We'll see!

**Guest:** So much hate for Max in these reviews. Not that I don't agree!

**Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or any of its original characters.**

**0-0-0**

"El," Mike said.

She looked up at him, holding her breath as she fixed her wide hopeful eyes on his face. What was he going to say? That he believes her about not being with Brad while the two of them were together? That they can absolutely be friends again? That he could never hate her in a million years?

"You look really—" Mike was interrupted when Brad appeared, slinging his arm over her shoulder with another "there you are." El felt her stomach drop as she watched Mike sip from his cup and turn to look away. Now she would never know what he had been about to say.

"I was wondering why it was taking you so long to get a couple drinks," Brad said, and El noticed the suspicious glance he shot Mike who was facing away from them at this point.

"There were a lot of people ahead of me refilling, and I wanted to get some air," El offered as an explanation. Brad didn't need to know that she had initiated the conversation with Mike and that she had pulled him out here with her. She certainly didn't like the vibe she was getting from Brad as he held her close to his side and eyed Mike.

El felt Brad nudge her hair out of his way with his nose as he dipped his face to whisper in her ear. Ordinarily, him closing in like this would make El blush and grin, but tonight she felt her body tense up as his lips grazed along her skin. Secretly, she hoped Mike wasn't seeing this, but she sensed that he was.

"You're cold," Brad whispered as his warm skin touched El's chilled skin. "Let's go back inside, and I'll warm you up."

Brad linked his fingers with El's and pulled her through the patio door back into the kitchen before she could react. She looked back over her shoulder through the glass at Mike who was still standing outside on the patio, and she felt overwhelming remorse. Remorse for

hurting him, remorse for their conversation being interrupted and cut short... and remorse for him having to watch as another guy pulled her down the hallway away from him and into a bedroom.

The door closed behind them, and Brad turned the lock before tangling both his hands in El's hair as he pulled her lips to his. He kissed her hungrily, moving his hands down her back until they reached her ass. El's eyes shot open wide, and she squeaked into his mouth as Brad firmly squeezed her ass cheeks, pulling her body closer against his. In one swift motion, Brad quite literally swept El from her feet as he linked one hand under each of her thighs to wrap her legs around his waist, and he turned and carried her to the bed.

Brad laid El on her back and hovered over her before diving into the crook of her neck, covering her skin in kisses. El was unsure of what to do. Everything had just happened so quickly. Not even five minutes ago, she had been outside talking to Mike, and now she was laying underneath Brad while he nipped and sucked the skin on her collarbone. She knew she should be feeling something. She should be feeling goosebumps spread over her body or a warmth pooling in her lower region. But as El lay under Brad, hearing him pant into her ear and feeling his dick hardening through his pants against her thigh, she felt nothing but uncomfortable.

El's mind was still out on that patio with Mike, ready to hang on whatever words he had been about to say to her before she had gotten pulled away. She wasn't focused on her date or on what was going on in this bedroom, and truthfully, she wasn't in the mood for it anyway.

"Brad," El said, pulling her neck away from the suction of his lips.

"Hmm?" Brad hummed into her ear as he adjusted so he could reach her jawline again and began tracing kisses over it.

"I don't think we should..." El said, pulling away again and maneuvering one of her arms in between her body and his, placing a hand on Brad's chest and pushing him lightly upward, hoping he would get the hint that she wanted him off of her.

It seemed as though Brad did get the hint because he propped himself

up to hover over her, fully extending both of his arms, and El noticed she was still trapped beneath him while he glowered down at her.

"What's the matter?" he asked in a low voice. El swallowed hard while looking up at him, and she moved her leg so it was no longer touching Brad's semi-hard penis.

"Nothing's the matter. It's just we've never gone any farther together and-"

"And tonight is the perfect time to change that," Brad interrupted, and El noticed how much smoother his voice had become. "You look so beautiful tonight, and I can't think about anything but being with you."

El found that hard to believe, as the two of them had been separated numerous times throughout the night. First, Brad had been so engulfed in conversation with his teammates at the dance that he didn't acknowledge El standing next to him waiting to be included until she finally left to go see her own friends. Then, when Brad and El had gotten to the party about a half hour before the homecoming dance was even due to end, she had been put on the back burner while he took shots with some of his buddies. When El had seen Max arrive, she had excused herself to greet her best friend and accompany her to the kitchen for a drink. And most recently, El had snuck away to refill her cup when Brad was in the middle of a game of beer pong with Tyler. For someone who had told her he planned on spending the whole night with her, Brad had certainly spent a lot of the night away from her.

"I'm just not... ready," El said. "I'm sorry."

She knew she shouldn't have to apologize for not wanting to have sex with him, but she couldn't help feeling a bit guilty. Brad had been nothing but nice to her, taking her out on dates and respecting all of her boundaries. She hoped he would be understanding and respect her wishes again.

"It's fine," he huffed, and El caught a strong whiff of alcohol. She had known he had been drinking much heavier than she had.

"Thank you," El said in relief as Brad stood from the bed. She sat up on the edge, facing him as he stood in front of her.

"What are you thanking me for? If the answer's no, it's no," Brad said bitterly as he shrugged. El thought that would be the end of the conversation, until Brad muttered under his breath, "Thanks a fucking lot, Wheeler."

"What did you say?" El asked firmly, narrowing her eyes as Brad ran a hand through his hair.

"I saw you talking to your ex-boyfriend," Brad accused.

"So? I haven't talked to him since we broke up. I was just asking how he's been," El explained, adding in her mind that it wasn't any of Brad's business what she was talking to Mike about.

"Sure. So that's why we've been going out for a few weeks, and things have been great. I've bought you dinner, bought your homecoming ticket, bought a fucking tie to match the color of your dress. We were having a great time together tonight, then I walk up to see you talking to Mike Wheeler with heart-eyes like you're in a fucking Disney movie or something, and now all of a sudden you aren't interested in me anymore?" Brad spat.

"What?!" El exclaimed, completely dumbfounded. "I never said I wasn't interested in you anymore. I said I wasn't ready to have sex. And buying me dinner and taking me to a dance isn't going to speed that process up."

She sat silent for a moment, staring up at Brad, fuming inside. How could he feel so entitled to her? How could she have been so stupid? She defended him time and time again, and here he was in front of her, proving everything Will had said right. El shook her head and stood from the bed to walk past him.

"I need to get out of here," she muttered.

"Need some more *air*?" Brad said venomously, stopping El in her tracks as her blood boiled. She spun on her heel to face Brad who was giving her a smug look. El opened her mouth to say something,

anything. She wanted to tell him off, call him a pig, tell him to never call her again. But she thought better of it and closed her mouth.

"Forget it," she said, waving her hand, and turned her back to Brad, reaching for the door.

"El, wait," Brad said, jogging over and inserting himself between El and the bedroom door.

"No, Brad. Enough. You've been drinking, and I don't want to hear any more," El insisted, trying to push him to the side so she could open the door.

"Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. I promise," Brad said calmly, taking one of El's hands in his and staring at her with pleading eyes.

"Then why did you say it?" El asked, pulling her hand out of his grip.

"I don't know, I..." Brad sighed and ran his hand through his hair again. "I guess it's just because I like you so much, and... I don't know. Knowing how long you were with Mike and how close you must've been to him... It just feels like you won't let me in quite like that. So seeing you with him made me... jealous. And then when you shut me down right after... And I know that it's totally your right to say no. I guess I just... I guess I'm just an idiot."

El stood quietly, looking into Brad's eyes, trying to read whether he was being truthful with her. He did seem genuine, and after all, he had been drinking. Plus, El could relate to feelings of jealousy, thinking of Mike and Lindsey. She began to slowly shake her head, and Brad relaxed a bit when a smile started to tug at the corners of El's lips.

"Well, you *are* an idiot," El grinned, and Brad furrowed his brow, noticeably taken aback by her words. "Mike and I have known each other for five years. It has nothing to do with me not 'letting you in.' And I like you too, obviously, or I wouldn't be having this conversation." Brad sighed in relief and took El's hand again.

"So, are we okay?" he asked hopefully. El bit her bottom lip while thinking about how to answer. Truthfully, no, they weren't okay. She

really did not appreciate what Brad had said and how entitled to sex he had seemed. But, he did seem genuinely sorry, and it was completely possible that he was acting childish because of the alcohol.

"Not quite, but I think we will be," El smiled.

"I'll take it," Brad sighed and grinned. "I really, really am sorry. That was so unlike me. I'll prove it to you."

"I sure hope so," El replied and reached for the doorknob again. This time, Brad stepped to the side and let her open the door, following her out into the hallway.

Brad and El walked into the living room, and El found Max and Lucas on the other side of the room. As El started their way, Brad grabbed her arm and leaned in to her ear to tell her he was going to go outside for a cigarette. El nodded and made her way over to Max and Lucas alone. Max greeted El with a hug, and El glanced up at Lucas whose head was tilted back against the wall. He almost looked like he was dozing off.

Max started talking about how much fun this party was and that they should totally come to Tyler's afterparty on prom night too. El was half listening as she glanced around the room looking for Mike. Had he left for the night? El was almost sure that he must have, until she saw him and Lindsey coming down the stairs. Once again, El felt her stomach sink as Mike and Lindsey descended. Mike's eyes met El's almost instantly, and El swore she saw guilt in them. She couldn't bring herself to look at Lindsey.

Mike and Lindsey joined El, Max, and Lucas briefly as Mike said that they were about to leave. He told Max and Lucas goodbye, and El felt a pang of sadness when he simply smiled and nodded in her direction. She returned the gesture, nevertheless, and Mike and Lindsey walked out of the house.

"We should get going, too," Max said. "We don't want Lucas to fall asleep behind the wheel." She nudged Lucas and he playfully rolled his eyes. El was thankful that Lucas had agreed to give her a ride, even though she knew she wasn't his favorite person. She also knew

that it was likely because she was tagging along with Max to Max's house.

El agreed, and Max excused herself to use the restroom before leaving, so El was left standing awkwardly with Lucas. After a moment, Lucas excused himself for the restroom as well, and El was waiting patiently for them to return. She was leaning against the wall with her arms crossed over her chest, wondering why Brad's cigarette break seemed to be taking so long, as she wanted to tell him she was leaving. Then, a voice startled her out of her thoughts.

"Excuse me," called the female voice, and El turned to her right to see Lindsey standing behind the armchair, waving in El's direction.

"Me?" El asked, raising her eyebrows in confusion as Lindsey nodded.

"I left my clutch on the couch. Could you pass it to me?" she pointed to the small blue bag resting on the cushion of the couch. El nodded and squeezed through a couple clusters of her classmates to retrieve the clutch.

El picked up Lindsey's clutch and started maneuvering through the room to get to her. El's heartbeat started increasing the closer she got to Lindsey. Did Lindsey know who she was? Was that why she had asked El specifically to get her bag? Did she leave it there on purpose so she would have a chance to corner El? El shook these crazy thoughts from her head as she reached Mike's date and extended the clutch to her.

"Thank you so much," Lindsey smiled as she accepted her clutch. El nodded politely and turned to walk away, but Lindsey grabbed ahold of her wrist. This was it. El turned back to face Lindsey, mentally preparing for the catfight that was surely about to go down.

"I just wanted to say that I love your dress. The color looks stunning on you," Lindsey said sweetly.

"Oh," El said surprised, stifling a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

"Of course," Lindsey smiled, releasing her hold on El's wrist. "Have a great night."

Lindsey turned and walked out of the house, leaving El standing in confusion, looking after her. What was that? Why did Lindsey just go out of her way to say something nice to her? Did she know who El was? Or did Lindsey think she was just complimenting a random girl's dress? Had she meant it sarcastically and El had missed it? In the midst of running through every possibility, Max returned, followed by Lucas, and El soon followed them to the front door.

They reached the front door as Brad was coming back inside, and El told him she was heading to Max's house. Brad nodded and made a hesitant move to offer El a hug. El nodded her approval and stepped forward, extending her arms.

"I really am sorry about earlier," Brad said in her ear. "Can I call you tomorrow?"

El thought about it for a moment, and when she pulled back from the hug, she nodded. Brad smiled, relieved, and told the three of them to have a good night. El followed Max and Lucas outside and rode to Max's house in silence.

The next morning, El woke up and groggily focused her eyes on a wall that was certainly not hers. She glanced around and remembered she was in Max's room. When she turned her head to the side, she saw Max was not in the bed with her, and she wondered where her friend had gone so early. El sighed and started to sit up to go investigate, but she heard the distant sound of Max's voice coming from what sounded like the living room. Hearing only Max's voice, El decided she must be on the phone with Lucas or someone.

El laid back against the pillow and stared up at the ceiling, replaying much of the previous night in her head. It had been such a whirlwind of emotions. The dance, seeing Mike with Lindsey, talking to Mike on the patio, everything that happened with Brad, seeing Mike and Lindsey coming downstairs, Lindsey being so polite to her... El didn't know what to feel. She was still somewhat upset with Brad about how he had behaved in the bedroom, and she knew that should be her primary focus, but El couldn't help but fixate on Mike and Lindsey.

Why was she so stuck on them? She had known they had been seeing

each other for weeks. She had seen them in the halls together countless times. Maybe it was because this was the first time she had actually *spoken* to Mike since the breakup? Maybe it was because this was the first time she had actually spoken to Lindsey in general? Maybe it was because of the look in Mike's eyes when he met her gaze on the stairs?

El could no longer hear Max's voice, so she assumed she was no longer on the phone. She did hear Max's footsteps coming down the hallway, and soon the bedroom door opened and her best friend walked in.

"Rise and shine," Max smiled, hopping on the bed as El continued to stare up at the ceiling.

"I think they had sex," El said bluntly.

"Who?" Max asked, furrowing her brow.

"Mike and Lindsey," El replied simply.

"El," Max sighed and bowed her head, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"I talked to him last night," El said, and then clarified, "Mike."

"Why? What did you talk about?" Max asked, and El could tell her friend was frustrated with her.

"Nothing really. Asked how he was doing, asked how Lindsey was doing," El shrugged.

"El," Max nearly whined. "You have got to stop worrying about Mike and Lindsey. It's not good for you, and you'll never move on... And why do you think they had sex?" Max couldn't help but be curious as to what brought this assumption on.

"They were upstairs together at the party last night. When they came downstairs, her makeup looked like it had gotten messed up and she had to wipe it off," El explained.

"That doesn't mean they had sex. Maybe they were just making out,"

Max offered.

"Mike looked guilty when he saw me," El stated. Max pursed her lips, unsure of what to say.

"Well," she started, "whether they did or not-"

"I know, I know. It doesn't matter because they're together now, and I'm seeing what's out there and doing this for me," El said dismissively. She sighed and stared back up at the ceiling.

"Brad and I had a fight last night," El said, and out of the corner of her eye, she saw Max's head snap up to look at her.

"What happened?!" Max asked.

"Brad saw me talking to Mike, and then he pulled me into a bedroom and tried taking things farther than I was ready to. I stopped him, and he got mad at me," El explained. "He said that I rejected him because of Mike." Max was silent for a moment as she studied her friend's face.

"Well... *did* you reject him because of Mike?" she asked carefully.

"No. I stopped him because I wasn't ready to take that next step with him," El replied. "But he was such a jerk about it."

"I'm sorry, El," Max said, rubbing El's shoulder. "But wait, you gave him a hug before we left the party."

"He apologized and said that he only said it because he's jealous of how close I was with Mike. He said he didn't mean the things he said," El explained.

"Do you believe him?" Max asked slowly.

"I don't know," El sighed. "He seemed genuine, but the things he said had to come from somewhere, right? I just... I don't know what to think about this."

"Personally, I don't like that he got angry with you over sex. Whether he blames it on jealousy or not, you could be going down a

dangerous road here," Max said. "I would think long and hard before going out with him again if I were you."

"I can't just keep ending things with guys every time you say to," El said quickly before she could stop herself. She bit the tip of her tongue immediately afterward and glanced over at Max whose expression was a mixture of shock and hurt.

"That's not... I'm not suggesting that you do, El," Max said. "I just think you should be careful."

El laid in silence, rubbing her thumb back and forth over the hem of the blanket she was covered in while staring at the ceiling. She had one more thing to tell Max about.

"Lindsey talked to me last night," she said.

"What?!" Max exclaimed even louder than her last outburst.

"After you went to the bathroom, Lindsey got my attention and asked me to hand her her clutch, so I did. Then she grabbed my wrist and told me she loved my dress and that the color is stunning on me," El recalled.

"That's it?" Max asked, and El nodded. "That's weird."

"I thought so too," El agreed. "Like, what was the purpose of that?"

"Maybe she didn't realize you were Mike's ex, and she genuinely thought the dress was pretty?" Max suggested.

"I thought about that," El shook her head. "But what if she knew exactly who I was, and she is trying to be extra nice to me to show that she is a good person, and then she makes me look petty for hating her now that she's sleeping with Mike?"

"That... doesn't make any sense," Max said.

"Sure it does. If I don't fawn over how sweet and perfect she is, I'm just the bitter ex-girlfriend," El explained.

"El, I really don't think Lindsey has some sort of conspiracy to make

you look like a bitter ex," Max said gently. "It was late, everyone had been drinking. I'm sure she just didn't realize who you were and wanted to tell you she liked your dress."

"Maybe," El muttered. "Anyway, I was surprised you and Lucas were on the phone so early this morning."

El decided to change the subject. Trying to process all the different things that had happened was making her head spin, and she couldn't help but notice a feeling of emptiness emerging the more she thought about Mike and Lindsey.

"Oh, I wasn't on the phone with Lucas," Max said. "I was on the phone with Robin. She and Abby are coming to town for Thanksgiving, and they wanted to make sure we had some time to hang out with them."

"That's like a month away," El said.

"Right. They wanted to let us know in advance," Max shrugged.

'Can't wait to hear what wonderful relationship advice Abby has for me this time,' El thought to herself but bit her tongue to avoid saying it. She was feeling extraordinarily bitter, and she didn't want to cause any drama with Max.

"Are you hungry?" Max asked. As if on cue, El's stomach growled loudly, and the two girls burst into laughter. "Well I would say so! Come on, let's go fix some Eggos."

El climbed out of bed and followed Max to the kitchen. Surely she would start to feel better after getting some food in her system. The bitterness she was feeling toward Max and Abby would pass, just like the emptiness growing when she thought about Mike and Lindsey. She would talk to Brad later today, and she would put their misunderstanding behind them; he had been drinking, after all. El told herself that she was just feeling off because so much had happened in such a short timeframe. Everything was going to be okay. She pulled the maple syrup down from the second shelf in the cupboard and sat down next to her best friend to enjoy their breakfast.

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**A/N: Robin and Abby will be rejoining us soon! Also, as you can probably assume, more drama to come on the Mike/Lindsey/El/Brad/Max front. Let me know what you're thinking so far. Thank you for reading, and please remember to leave me a review!**

## 10. Chapter 10

A/N: Welcome back! Thank you for being patient, as the wait for this chapter was a little lengthier than I like. I hope you enjoy it!

Guest: Agreed, Max is not blameless. And don't worry, last chapter was just the beginning of the El/Max tension.

Guest: Thank you so much for your kind words! I understand not liking Brad, Max, or El in this story. Hopefully El will become sympathetic to you in time. I'm glad you like the story so much!

JayneFawn: I love your analysis of this. You're right; neither Mike nor El have really done much growing during their breakup, but that will surely come. I am excited for what I have planned with Abby's return. I hope you like it when I get to that point. I also hope you like this chapter!

Stranger Records: Absolutely agree. Couples who are in love break up and get back together at times. It's all about the road that leads them back there. And yes, for once, Max was right in her advice.

Niko: Hmm... I'm not sure how "thankful" Mike would feel toward Abby haha.

Simon Samovar: Yes, El's pain is certainly nowhere near over.

Phieillydinya: We'll find out soon what happens between El and Brad!

UnoPeso22: Welcome! I appreciate your review for each chapter, and I love that you binged this story. Thank you for your in-depth thoughts. Mike and Lindsey being destined to meet "in another life" without El is a very interesting interpretation. And thank you for appreciating the subtleties in the story. As far as El using her powers on Mike during sex, Max said she didn't want to hear anymore, so you can use your imagination there haha. I'm glad you like the story, and I hope you like this chapter!

**Guest: Thank you! Here you go!**

**Guest: I'm glad you like it so much! Yes, even though Abby and Max influenced her, El made the decision at the end of the day. I'm glad you like Lindsey so much! I love her!**

**NoDownSide: Yes, El is definitely starting to learn a few tough lessons.**

**Exploding Helmets: I think El feeling rejected by the rest of the party is warranted. They were her friends too, and they did accept Lindsey rather quickly.**

**Jean Sumnerland: Mike is currently with an OC, but there is still a long road ahead for this story. I'm sorry if you choose to stop reading, but thank you for giving it a chance.**

**Nighting Ryder: El is definitely starting to realize some things. We will dive more into that very soon. I hope you enjoy!**

**Jane Eleanor Wheeler: I agree, that is a very important thing to know in a relationship.**

**39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star: I'm glad you liked it! I understand the dislike of Brad lol. And yes, Abby and Robin being back will be fun!**

**Mik El Max: I like that parallel.**

**IgNighted: Thank you, I'm glad you like it. I agree, it is hard to think of Mileven not being together.**

**Guest: Hmm... those are both definitely things that could happen. I hope you like whichever route it goes!**

**Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or any of its original characters.**

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While El was having Eggos with Max, Mike was waking up on the other side of town. He still couldn't believe everything that had

happened last night. Mike had actually started a sexual relationship with someone who wasn't El. Until last night, El was the only girl who had ever even seen his dick, let alone touch it... or do anything else with it.

Mike rubbed his eyes and groaned as he rolled over, planting his face in his pillow. El had to have known that something happened between him and Lindsey. Mike had made direct eye contact with her as he and Lindsey came back downstairs, and there was something unmistakable about the look in El's eyes that said she knew what he had done.

But so what? Minutes before going upstairs with Lindsey, hadn't Mike just watched El herself disappear into a bedroom with Brad? God only knows what had happened in that room. Mike didn't want to think about it.

He got out of bed and walked over to his full-length mirror, his bare torso reflected back at him. Mike raised his hand to his collarbone and inspected the skin around his neck for any trace of hickeys. He hadn't thought he saw any last night when he returned home from the dance and checked in the bathroom mirror before the long, hot shower he took, but double checking never hurt anyone. The last thing he needed was embarrassing questioning from his mother.

Sure enough, Mike saw slight discoloration on the side of his neck under his left ear. He ran his fingers over it and decided that it would easily be hidden if he wore a hoodie. Problem solved.

Mike got dressed and walked downstairs to an empty living room and kitchen. He saw his mom's neat handwriting on a piece of paper on the refrigerator, and he soon learned that she and Holly had gone to the store. Mike peaked into the living room just to confirm that his dad wasn't sleeping in the la-z-boy, and he decided it was the perfect time to give Lindsey a call.

He wasn't sure exactly what he would say to her, but the last thing he wanted was for Lindsey to think for a moment that Mike wasn't going to call her again. He remembered hearing Nancy and her girl friends talking about boys not calling them or wanting to see them again, and Mike didn't want Lindsey to feel that way. If one thing was for

sure, Mike knew that he definitely wanted to see Lindsey again. He dialed her number and listened to the phone ring.

"Hello?" Lindsey's voice answered.

"Hey, Lindsey? It's Mike," Mike said.

"Hey," she smiled through the phone. "I was hoping you'd call... I kind of wanted to talk about last night."

"Um, sure... What, uh, part about last night?" Mike asked awkwardly, thinking he knew but not sure what she would want to discuss about it.

"I think you know what part," Lindsey smirked.

"Oh, yeah... So are you having second thoughts about... doing that?" Mike wondered sheepishly.

"No! Of course not. I told you I wouldn't regret anything about that," Lindsey replied quickly. "Do you regret it?"

"No," Mike said, relieved.

"Good," Lindsey said happily. "But I did kind of want to talk about what it means for us."

"What it means?" Mike repeated.

"Yeah," Lindsey replied, and then she was silent for a bit as if she were waiting for Mike to answer. "Like, does this change things for us? I know we've kind of been going out for a while now, and I'm not the type of girl to pressure you to put a label on anything-"

"Oh!" Mike interjected, suddenly realizing what she was nervously rambling about. "Yeah, um, I guess I hadn't really thought about that."

"I mean, I don't know about you, but that's not something I do with people I'm just friends with," Lindsey joked.

"Yeah, no, uh... me neither," Mike agreed, followed by silence from

both ends of the line as each of them waited for the other to speak.

Lindsey was right, Mike thought. They had been going out for a while; going on dates, hanging out at his house, going to the homecoming dance, and now they've started to progress physically as well. It's true, they were practically dating anyway, they just hadn't put an official label on what they were. And why was that? Mike knew he liked Lindsey, and he knew she liked him. What was holding him back from officially asking her out? The answer was nagging in the back of Mike's mind, and he quickly pushed it away.

"Listen, I'm sorry I brought it up," Lindsey said finally.

"Don't be!" Mike said quickly. "I'm sorry that I *haven't* brought it up. It's just, like I've said, I care about you, and I don't want to end up hurting you."

"Mike," Lindsey sighed. "It's very sweet that you don't want me to get hurt, but I think you're worrying about that too much. And I think it's because of how badly *you* got hurt, and you don't want to do that to someone else. But you can't just keep letting that keep you from truly moving on."

"I know," Mike agreed.

"So...?" Lindsey asked, and Mike chuckled.

"Well I'm not going to ask you to be my girlfriend over the phone," he said. He knew there were some things that were just meant to be done in person.

"I can come over," Lindsey teased.

"I mean, if you want to, I'm not going to stop you. The guys are coming over this afternoon," Mike said.

"Okay, I'll come over now and just leave when they get there," Lindsey offered.

"Sure, okay. I'll see you soon, then," Mike said. He and Lindsey ended their phone call, and he set the phone down, stunned.

*Fuck.* She was really on her way over to his house to finish the 'what are we' talk. That's not what Mike was expecting when he had called her, but he couldn't pretend that she didn't make some good points. But still, was he sure he wanted to be in a new relationship already? Well, he kind of already was, just without calling her his girlfriend.

'Calling her his girlfriend.' Shit. How was he supposed to ask her? With El it had been easy. After kissing her again at the Snow Ball, he had asked her if she knew what boyfriends and girlfriends were, and El had said no. Mike had explained the concept of dating to her; two people who really liked each other as more than just friends, spending time together, going on dates, and agreeing not to like anyone else as more than a friend. He had only been thirteen when he explained it, so he thought he did a decent job. He must have, anyway, because when El said she understood, she had asked him if that meant she was his girlfriend, and Mike asked her if she wanted to be. Then, they were together.

With Lindsey, things were completely different. They were seventeen. They had both been in relationships in the past. He didn't have to explain anything to her; he just had to ask her. But how? 'Will you be my girlfriend?' 'I want you to be my girlfriend.' 'Do you want to be my girlfriend?' It all sounds so awkward, and factoring in Mike's natural awkwardness, he was certain this would be a trainwreck.

Mike finally quit pacing back and forth and finally took a seat on the couch in the living room and waited for Lindsey to arrive. About fifteen minutes later, she pulled into his driveway, and Mike watched out the window as she walked up the path to the front door. When she knocked, he stood from the couch and walked to the door, took in a deep breath, and opened it so they were face-to-face.

"Hey," he smiled. Lindsey warmly returned the smile, and Mike stepped to the side so she could come in. She took off her jacket and hung it in the hall, wearing jeans and a simple green sweater. "You look nice."

"Really?" Lindsey asked quickly, surprised because her auburn hair was not styled, just simply laying over her shoulders, and she had almost entirely skipped out on the makeup today, opting only for mascara and tinted chapstick. "Thanks, but I didn't really do anything

special."

"You don't have to. I like the natural look," Mike replied, and Lindsey blushed a bit.

Mike bit back a smirk as he thought about how a little over twelve hours ago, the girl in front of him had been practically begging to suck his cock, and now she was blushing from a simple compliment. Alcohol certainly works in mysterious ways.

"So do you want to go downstairs and talk? My mom and little sister will be back from the store soon, and they won't interrupt us down there," Mike offered. Lindsey nodded and followed him down the basement stairs, and they sat on the couch next to each other.

"Before you say anything," Lindsey started quickly when Mike had opened his mouth to speak. "I just want to say that I don't mean to pressure you into anything with me. I know things with your ex-girlfriend are making you a little hesitant, and I know you're still working on getting over her. It's just that we've been seeing each other and having a great time for a while, and I've been as supportive as I can, but I need to know if this thing between you and I is really going somewhere."

"That's fair," Mike nodded. "I do really like you, and I really appreciate how supportive you've been about El- er, about my ex. You've been there for me when I needed to talk about it, and getting to know you has just been awesome."

"I like you a lot too," Lindsey assured him when he paused for a moment.

"I know it's not fair to you to keep treating you like we're dating without actually asking you out and still expect you to be patient about my ex-girlfriend," Mike said.

"Well, do you think you're *ready* to move on?" Lindsey asked. Mike thought for a moment about how badly El had hurt him and how much easier Lindsey had truly made the past month and a half or so since the breakup. He slowly nodded his head.

"Yeah, I think I am," he said. "Now, I think I already know the answer to this, but you're amazing, and... do you want to be my girlfriend?"

"I would love to," Lindsey smiled brightly.

Mike gently placed a hand on the side of her face and pulled her lips toward his. He was actually moving on. Lindsey was his girlfriend now, and he hadn't felt this happy in nearly two months. Finally, something good was coming out of the pain El had put him through.

Nearly two hours later, Mike was walking Lindsey to the front door as Lucas was walking up the path to the other side of the door. Mike opened the door to let Lucas in, and Lucas stood in the foyer as Mike kissed Lindsey goodbye and told her he would see her tomorrow. When he closed the door behind her, he was met instantly with a goofy grin from Lucas.

"Well it looks like *someone* had a good night," Lucas teased.

"She didn't spend the night here. She came over this morning," Mike clarified, leaving out the fact that he did, in fact, still have a good night.

The two of them went downstairs, and soon after, Will and Dustin arrived. Dustin plopped down on the couch and covered his face with a pillow, groaning into it while his friends laughed at him.

"How ya feeling today?" Lucas asked, intentionally louder than normal.

"Like shit," Dustin grumbled. "I've never had a hangover this bad before."

"You did take a lot of shots last night," Lucas pointed out.

"I'm not sure when I blacked out, but I don't even remember leaving the dance," Dustin admitted. "I feel like I was hit by a fucking train."

"It'll go away. Drink some water. It'll hydrate you, plus you'll have something in your system when you puke," Lucas said.

"Don't make me think about..." Dustin trailed off and shuddered at

the thought of vomiting. He quickly changed the subject.

"How was the rest of your night?" he asked.

"It was all right," Lucas shrugged. "Went to that party and third-wheeled those two all night." He gestured at Mike.

"That's not true," Mike said defensively.

"So you're saying you weren't cuddled up on the couch together? Or that you didn't disappear upstairs together?" Lucas teased.

"What?!" Dustin snapped his head in Mike's direction, immediately regretting the movement when his head throbbed in protest. Will's eyes also shifted over to Mike whose cheeks were turning red.

"Okay, yeah... that happened," Mike mumbled.

"And then after they were together all night, I saw her leaving here when I got here today," Lucas continued, smirking at Mike.

"I told you, she didn't spend the night. She came over this morning," Mike insisted, frustrated.

"Uh huh," Dustin teased.

"I'm serious. I called her this morning to talk about some things, and she came over to finish the talk in person," Mike explained vaguely.

"Sure, she came over to *talk*," Lucas smirked, using his fingers to add air quotes around the word 'talk.' Mike shot him a glare to tell him that he wasn't appreciating the hard time his friends were giving him.

"Actually she did. We had the talk this morning about what we... are," Mike said seriously. The other three dropped the teasing instantly and turned more serious.

"Wait, really?" Lucas asked, and Mike nodded.

"Yeah. We've been going out for a while now, and she wanted to know if things were really going anywhere between us," Mike explained. "Long story short, we're dating now. Like, officially."

"Officially?" Will repeated. "As in, you're actually calling her your girlfriend now?"

Mike locked eyes with his lifelong friend, knowing Will was in a difficult position being close to both him and El. Slowly, Mike nodded.

"Yeah. She's my girlfriend now," he confirmed. Will tried to suppress the uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach as he thought of how El would react to the news.

"Well it's about time," Dustin said.

"Seriously," Lucas agreed.

Mike let out a sigh of relief that his friends supported and accepted his new relationship. They spent the afternoon playing Nintendo, and Dustin's hangover gradually got better with time. An hour before dinnertime, Dustin stood to tell everyone goodbye before heading home. Lucas was soon to follow, leaving only Mike and Will in his basement.

"You haven't said much today," Mike observed as he turned off the Nintendo and turned to face his friend.

"Not much to talk about, I guess," Will shrugged.

"Look, I know you live with El, and I know she's going to find out about me and Lindsey-"

"And you won't have to be there when she does," Will interrupted bitterly. "Best case scenario, she accepts it and moves on with Brad. Worst case scenario... I don't even want to think about how she could react."

"Well what did you expect me to do, Will? Just wait for her to want me again? Need I remind you that *she* is the one who started all of this in the first place?" Mike pointed out. He was getting frustrated.

"No, I definitely don't need reminded. I just worry about her, you know? And it was one thing when Lindsey was just your homecoming date and you kind of liked her... But El finding out that you're

actually *dating* another girl? That you're in a new relationship so fast?" Will explained. He noticed the anger quickly fill Mike's eyes.

"*I'm* in a new relationship so fast?" Mike repeated. "How about El being head over heels for Brad Connor the day after she dumped me?"

"I know, I know. That was messed up," Will agreed. "But, come on, Mike. You were so in love with El, and you're already in another relationship not even two months later? I just don't want El to be hurt. And I don't want Lindsey to get hurt either, thinking she's in a relationship that could go somewhere, just to find out one day she was only a rebound. I love you, man, but this is the kind of stuff I'm worried about."

Mike exhaled and pondered Will's words. He couldn't be mad at his friend for looking out for everyone. That was just part of Will's nature. And Mike knew that Will lived with and cared about El and that he also liked Lindsey a lot. Will was just concerned for all of his friends, and Mike could see that. But he knew Will was wrong about the outcome.

"That's not going to happen. Lindsey is not a rebound," Mike said calmly. "I really like her. I know it might seem like I moved on with her super fast, but she was just there for me when everything with El happened. Then I got to know her slowly and gradually, and I like spending time with her, and I want to be around her. I'm sorry if that might upset El, and I'm truly sorry you feel like you're in the middle of this, Will, really I am. But I want to be happy again, and when I'm with Lindsey, I feel like I'm one step closer to that."

"Okay," Will nodded. "You're my best friend, and if what you say is true, then I'm happy for you."

"Thanks, Will," Mike sighed.

Will soon told him goodbye for the evening and started his drive home. He replayed Mike's words in his mind over and over, and he wanted to believe that Mike was telling the truth. Maybe Mike even believed that he *was* telling the truth. But Will had been best friends with Mike for twelve years at this point, and he knew Mike like the

back of his hand. He knew Mike didn't mean everything he said, even if Mike himself didn't know it yet. Will just hoped that he realized it before anyone else got hurt.

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A/N: This chapter and the next chapter were originally going to be one chapter, but I decided they would be better as two separate pieces. Lucky for you, I'm already working on the next chapter, which means it will be posted within a few days! I realize that this chapter and the next chapter may feel a bit like filler chapters, but there are a couple things that I needed to happen before the meat of the story can begin. We're getting close to a lot of drama and a lot of emotions. Here is a small taste of what you can expect in the upcoming chapters: the return of Abby and Robin, a Mike/Nancy talk scene, a Lindsey/El confrontation, Mileven interactions, and much more drama. I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and please remember to leave me a review!

## 11. Chapter 11

A/N: Welcome back. Before I get to the shout-outs, I want to say that, in general, I love reading through the reviews for this story. I love hearing what you guys think about the premise and about how I'm writing the original characters, and I love hearing your thoughts on Lindsey and Brad. Clearly, everyone has thoughts on Mike and El's relationship. A lot of you want Mileven to get back together eventually, and a lot of you don't want Mileven to get back together and/or ship Mike and Lindsey together. Obviously, the story is going to end someday, and of course it will either end with Mileven together or apart. I know which way it is going to end, and I know that some of you will be happy and others may not be. Just know that regardless of which way it goes, I am doing my best to put together a good, entertaining story for you all, and I hope that even if the final outcome (which won't be for quite some time yet) is the opposite of what you want, I hope you enjoy the ride.

Guest: I really like Nancy, and I wish the show would develop a better sibling relationship between her and Mike. She will be making an appearance in the nearish future!

Stranger Records: Very true. We'll be seeing how right or wrong Will is soon.

Grievesforyou: Thank you. Those things I mentioned to be looking forward to aren't all happening this chapter, but in the coming chapters.

JayneFawn: Yes, they certainly don't call him Will the Wise for nothing. And you're right; unfortunately, the pain is not over.

39CluesStrangerThingsFan-Star: I always have a story planned before I publish it! That being said, I have revised my outline several times since starting it, but I always have to know where the story is going as a whole. I'm glad you like it!

Guest: Thank you!

**Exploding Helmets: Thank you! And don't we all?**

**Guest: I completely understand the anger toward El. She and Mike found something so rare so young. Abby's return is sure to bring more drama into the mix.**

**011: I promise, there will be a lot of angst to come in this story.**

**Simon Samovar: We'll see how Mike and Will's relationship goes!**

**Phieillydinyia: All your questions will be answered in the coming chapters!**

**Guest: I'm glad you like it so far. And I can assure you, whether I put Mike and El back together or not, it will not be a simple resolution, and I would never write Mike as being the second choice. Hopefully I don't let you down!**

**Song-wei: I am flattered that this story is inspiring you to write! You're right, there are so many alternatives to different plot points in this story, and I hope you're happy with whichever way I take it.**

**Guest: I understand anger toward El and even Will. Hopefully you end up happy with the way I take the story!**

**Guest New: Welcome to the story! If you are hoping for drama, I hope you enjoy what is about to come in the upcoming chapters. It definitely won't be a quick and simple resolution for anyone.**

**Guest: Yes, a lot of reviewers, whether they are guests or signed in, have similar thoughts. A good portion are angry with El and are shipping Mike/Lindsey, and another good portion want Mileven to get back together. Hopefully you are happy whichever way I take it!**

**JustNotLoggedIn: I will tell you that this will be a long story, and I still have a lot of ups and downs planned. I hope you're not disappointed whichever way I go, and please know that I will write all future drama as realistically as possible!**

**Disclaimer: I do not own Stranger Things or any of its original**

**characters.**

## **0-0-0**

El didn't know what to expect that Monday at school. Brad had called her Sunday afternoon, and the two of them talked. He apologized yet again for his actions Saturday night, and El assured him that she forgave him and that they would be okay. But there was still something inside her that just didn't feel right about him anymore. Sure, he was hot and relatively popular at school; she would probably be invited to more parties, and her social ranking would certainly benefit from being with him. He was funny and had a sensitive side to him, and they shared common interests.

But she still didn't like how angry he had gotten. Brad had simply seen her talking to Mike, and he had quickly gotten possessive. And when El told him she didn't want to have sex, Brad got angry and had blamed Mike. It could have just been the alcohol... but it also could have been indicative of Brad's temper when he doesn't get his way. Even if it was the former, would El be able to feel safe with someone who could turn so angry any time he drank alcohol?

Of course, she had not told Brad any of her thoughts; she simply accepted his apology and told him they would be okay. And El couldn't talk to Will or Joyce about it. Will would just tell her that he was right all along and that Brad is nothing but bad news, and Joyce would probably look too far into the anger because of her experiences with her own ex-husband. There was always Max, but she had already gotten Max's opinion, and at this point, El wasn't sure how much Max's opinion really mattered to her anymore.

As much as she tried to fight it, El couldn't help but feel a constant bitterness toward Max boiling inside her. El knew that Max was her best friend and always had El's best interest at heart, even if El didn't always appreciate Max's opinions or advice. Still, she couldn't fight the urge to blame Max for a lot of the pain she had gone through over the past two months.

Then there was Mike. The one person that El had always been able to talk to about anything. Of course, it was impossible to talk to Mike about this. He wasn't even an option. But, God, El missed talking to

him so much. She wished so badly that they had not been interrupted that night on the patio. He had barely even spoken to her, and since then, she had been longing to hear his voice saying her name again. Maybe, now that they had their first talk since their breakup, Mike would start talking to her at school.

Monday showed her that would not be the case.

El was at Brad's locker; his voice was drifting in and out of her ears but she wasn't hearing his words. She kept glancing over his shoulder to where Lindsey and Mike stood down the hall at Lindsey's locker. Mike was leaned back against the wall of lockers, talking while Lindsey pulled out the books she needed for her first couple classes of the day. She laughed at something he said, and El felt like she had been punched in the stomach. Lindsey closed her locker door, holding her books in one arm, and wrapped her other arm around Mike's waist as she pressed against him. Mike leaned down to kiss her, and El was unable to look away, noticeably cringing when she saw his and Lindsey's lips touch briefly.

"What's the matter?" Brad's concerned voice rang through, and El quickly looked up at him.

"N-nothing," she said, shaking her head. "I was just, uh..." She saw out of the corner of her eye as Mike and Lindsey linked hands and walked down the hall in the opposite direction.

"El? Are you sure? Look, if you're still upset with me, I understand-"

"No! Sorry, I just... I just remembered, I forgot my homework for first period, and I've got to go grab it. I'll see you later," El said and abruptly turned to walk quickly back toward her own locker.

After El had turned the corner and knew Brad could no longer see her, she ducked into the girls' bathroom. She looked under the stall doors to make sure she was alone before going into the last stall and locking the door.

"Shit," she whispered to herself as her eyes started to rim with tears. She ripped off a few squares of toilet paper and sat down on top of the lid, dabbing at her eyes.

What was wrong with her? She broke up with Mike nearly two months ago. She had seen him in the halls with Lindsey dozens of times, and it had never affected her like that. Why was it affecting her now? Could it be because she and Mike had finally spoken over the weekend? That couldn't be it. She was sure she could count on two hands the number of words Mike had actually said to her at that party. And that had only been because she dragged him out there. He didn't *want* to talk to her then, and she was crazy to think that he would want to talk to her now at school.

But still. El thought back to the way he had looked at her on that patio. He was going to say something before Brad came over. When it was just the two of them. Was El really stupid enough to think that Mike would have continued the conversation today? That moment, whatever it could've been, was long gone.

She sniffed and ripped off a little more toilet paper to dry her cheeks of the few tears that had escaped. When El had composed herself, she picked up her books and walked out of the stall to face herself in the mirror over the sinks. Her eyes were a little pink, but she knew that would go away quickly. She grabbed a paper towel and dampened it before gently dabbing it under her eyes. The cool water felt soothing on her skin.

She knew she had to stop thinking about Mike and Lindsey. Of course she was going to see them from time to time, and of course they were going to touch each other and kiss each other... El's stomach turned over as she thought about it. She wrung the paper towel over the sink, squeezing it until her knuckles turned white.

She couldn't run to the bathroom every time she saw Mike and Lindsey showing affection toward each other. She had to be stronger than that. After all, she had Brad now.

El tossed the paper towel in the trash can and picked up her books. When she pushed the door open, she nearly collided with Max.

"Sorry- hey!" Max smiled widely when she noticed it was El. El saw Max's face drop, probably as she noticed El's pink eyes. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Just, uh, something blew into my eye, so I had to clean it out," El lied lamely.

"I think we need to revisit the old 'friends don't lie' rule," Max said. El bit her tongue and chuckled bitterly.

"I said I'm fine, Max. I need to get to class," she stated before walking past Max and heading down the hall.

The rest of the week's events went similar to Monday's. El spent as much time with Brad as she could, hoping that engulfing herself in her new relationship would make it easier to forget her old one. It didn't. Mike and Lindsey were still everywhere. In fact, El thought she saw them even more after homecoming than she did before. She still couldn't help herself from sneaking glances whenever the two of them would walk by holding hands, or when Lindsey would wrap her arms around Mike's waist to pull him into a hug, or when Mike would brush her hair back to kiss her forehead, or even when their lips would meet each other's. Part of El wanted to complain to the principal about PDA or something, but she knew realistically that Mike and Lindsey weren't doing anything more than what other couples in the school did, and they certainly weren't doing anything more than what El herself and Mike had done publicly when they were together.

The only difference between Monday and the rest of the week was that El never again hid herself in the bathroom to cry over her ex. She instead chose to bite her tongue, smile, and go on with her day.

By the time the following week started, El had completely given up hope of Mike speaking to her. As far as she had seen, he hadn't even looked her way. Whatever progress she thought they were about to make that night on the patio was long dead.

El was walking alongside Brad between the final two periods of the day. She needed to stop at her locker to grab her algebra book before the study hall that she shared with Dustin. Luckily, Dustin had been helping her with algebra over the past couple months, and her grade had not suffered. When they reached her locker, Brad gently swept El's hair over her shoulder as she leaned into her locker to grab her algebra book.

"Practice was cancelled tonight," he said casually. "I know we were going to get dinner after practice, but if you want, you can catch a ride with me instead of Will after school, and we can spend the whole evening together."

The idea was enticing. El's guard was nearly completely down again since the events of the homecoming afterparty. Brad had been nothing but sincere; taking her to dinner, helping her study, taking her to his favorite spot over the water. He had been the same sweet guy that he was when they first started getting to know each other, and he had not tried to push her boundaries at all since that night at Tyler's. El knew that it had just been the alcohol, and Brad had gotten caught up in the moment. The reservations that had lingered in her mind since that night were nearly gone, and she knew that spending more and more time with him could do nothing but help push Mike and Lindsey out of her mind.

"Sure, I would like that," El agreed.

"Great. So I was thinking we could go to my place and study for a couple of hours. Then, we could still grab dinner like we planned, and we could catch a movie afterward," Brad suggested.

"That sounds fun," El smiled at the date he had planned.

"Cool. I'll meet you back here after class," Brad said. He leaned down to give her a peck on the lips and headed off to his last class of the day.

El loaded her books into her backpack and started walking toward her study hall. She glanced at the clock on the wall and saw that she had time to use the restroom before the bell rang, so she turned into the bathroom and stopped dead in her tracks. She recognized in an instant the girl in front of her who was reapplying mascara in the mirror over the sink. El considered turning around and leaving. She didn't need to pee that badly. But, that would be too obvious that she was trying to avoid her. Then again, did the girl even see her enter the bathroom? And if she did, did she recognize her?

"Hey," Lindsey smiled, making eye contact with El through the mirror as she twisted on the cap of her mascara and dropped it into her bag.

"Oh, hi," El replied, returning a small smile.

"It's El, isn't it?" Lindsey asked, turning to face her and leaning back against the sink.

"That's right," El said with a nod. She wanted to turn and run before she literally died from the awkwardness between them.

"It's nice to actually meet you. Alone," Lindsey said. She was still being nice, but the normal sweet tone in her voice was gone and replaced by something firmer... It wasn't quite anger; it was what girls reserved for other girls when they wanted to make their point clear.

"Why did you want to meet me?" El asked, furrowing her brow.

"Because it's time that you and I have a conversation about my boyfriend," Lindsey replied, carefully watching El's face. She did not miss the shock in El's widened eyes that El quickly tried to mask.

"Your b-boyfriend?" El repeated.

"You haven't heard," Lindsey stated.

El's mind became a whirlwind of questions. Was Lindsey really Mike's girlfriend, or was she just saying that to get a reaction out of El? If it was true, when did they start dating? How long? Did the boys know? Of course they knew. Did Max? How could Max not tell her? How could Will not tell her?

"Listen, El, I don't want there to be any bad blood between you and I," Lindsey continued. "We share some mutual friends now, and I know you're really important to the guys, just like you were really important to Mike. That's why I have been as nice and patient as I can be when it comes to you."

"I'm not going to stop being friends with them," El asserted. "Dustin, Will, Lucas... I've known them since we were twelve."

"I don't expect you to stop being friends with them at all," Lindsey said sincerely. "But I do expect you to leave Mike alone. You broke up with him. That was your choice. So I don't need you eyeing us in the

hallways or pulling him aside to try and talk to him."

The realization hit El like a ton of bricks.

"Yes, I saw you and him talking outside at the party that night," Lindsey confirmed as if she had read El's mind.

"So, you knew who I was? Even on your way out? Do you remember talking to me?" El asked, and Lindsey nodded.

"I had been hoping that you and I could co-exist and be cordial. But I can clearly see that either you're not over Mike or you're having second thoughts about leaving him," Lindsey explained. "Whatever it may be, it doesn't matter. You made the choice to break up with him, and now you have to be an adult and respect his choice to move on."

"You don't know me. And you barely know him," El said, her blood starting to boil at Lindsey's insinuations.

"I know him better than you think I do. And I don't need to know you. I don't want to know you," Lindsey replied. "I just want you to stay away from us for the rest of the school year. Then next year, Mike and I are both moving to Chicago for college, and this won't be an issue any longer."

El's world came to a screeching halt as Lindsey's words hit her. For a moment, she forgot to breathe in as her entire body turned to ice.

"Ch-Chicago?" she asked timidly.

"Oh, you haven't heard that either," Lindsey observed.

Faintly, El heard the bell ring throughout the hallways, and Lindsey slung her bag over her shoulder.

"I meant what I said about not wanting any hard feelings between us, El. And I really hope you can respect us enough to leave Mike alone. If not for me, for him," Lindsey said politely. "Take care of yourself."

El did not respond as Lindsey walked out of the bathroom. Her vision started to blur as tears quickly appeared and began to spill out. El leaned forward and clutched the edges of the sink to support herself

as a sob escaped her throat. Mike had a new girlfriend. And in less than a year, he was moving with that girlfriend to Chicago. This was it; she was really losing him. Her body shook as she stood alone in the empty bathroom, letting her tears fall freely into the sink. No, she wasn't losing him. She had already lost him. He was already gone.

**0-0-0**

A/N: I would like to say real quick that this is not my attempt at making Lindsey a "bad guy." She might come off harsh to El, but if you think about it, even the nicest person in the world knows how to stand their ground when it comes to someone they care about. Anyway, I do hope you liked this chapter. The heavy drama I've been promising will be starting soon. Please remember to leave me a review, and I will update again soon!